

The Atonement Ritual of Bodos

Dr. Hargouri Narzary

Associate Professor, Department of English, Gossaigaon College, Gossaigaon.

Abstract:

The present paper attempts to rediscover the atonement rituals of Bodo people who are invariably the followers of the traditional *Bathou* religion. The folklife of Bodos is arguably rich and multifaceted which can be seen in their day-to-day socio-cultural life. They have rich cultural traditions that have flourished through generations. The important thing is that a human being, responsible and at fault undergoes a loss, a denial of the self, which connects deeply with a personal sense of guilt for wrong and expresses the desire for evil to be purged, expiated, cleansed and expelled.

Keywords: Bodo, *Bathou*, Pollution, Atonement.

Introduction:

In the traditional *Bathou*ⁱ religion, the idea of contamination/pollution (*badua* or *badunga*) is connected with death, childbirth, menstrual bleeding, sexual adultery, violation of taboos, crimes etc. Apart from that, they also believe that the village and their natives become contaminated/polluted due to their contacts with the other peoples on various occasions during the year, such as marriages, funerals, social festivities, day-to-day business transactions etc., involving an act of omission, consciously or unconsciously. Thereby, they incur the wraths of the village deities, who consequently are likely to unleash natural calamities in various forms such as pestilence, drought, flood and other unknown diseases on the villagers and bring about untold miseries (Mosahary 1986:245). Therefore, to avert those unseen potential dangers, the annoyance of such deities must be appeased befittingly and the entire village community, as a rule, must get cleansed ceremoniously through the atonement rituals.

Why Atonement:

The observation of the atonement ritual becomes even more of a pre-requisite because of the cautionary proclamation made by God *Bathou Bwrai*ⁱⁱ in his initial utterance during the *Kherai* ritual: (Narzary 2018:166)

*Kobordar phisaphor,
raijwkhoulai mwjangyi jaa de nwnswr.
Omagari jabwla, soimagari jabwla,
Soima hengali (Mwsa jarou) lagaigwn,
bar birgona busogwn pisapwr.
Kobordar, kobordar, Nounwgrni phisaphor.
Mwjangywi raijwkhou jaadw, jaadw nwnswr.*

Translation:

Beware, be careful, oh my children,
lead good lives and abide by the truth.
If you live like pigs, if you live like dogs,
I shall surely let loose the tigers and set it on you,
windstorms will befall on you, oh my children.
Be careful my children, sons of *Nounwgr*ⁱⁱⁱ.
Lead good lives and abide by the truth.

For instance, according to traditional belief, the sick person is believed to be possessed by sinister deities/spirits. Endle (1911) also observed that a sick man (victim) lying prostrate with virulent fever was commonly assumed as being bitten or seized by the offended deity by the folks. This phenomenon is termed as *Mwdai ornai* or *Mwdai homnai* in the Bodo language, meaning the ‘deity is biting’ or ‘deity has seized.’ In other words, the discontented deity/spirit, tortures him with pain as punishment for impiety and neglect of the deity in question, not necessarily that he has committed an offence deliberately. At such a juncture, the victim/s undergoes the process of atonement with the help of *Ojha*^{iv} and *Douri*^v. Further, they have to wholeheartedly appease such deities/spirits by offering required sacrifices.

In this connection, it is worth mentioning that there are five ways of performing an atonement ritual called the *Badh kanti*, among the traditional *Bathou* religion. These are (a) *Agor Badh*, (b) *Fhongslodh Badh*, (c) *Daokhi Badh*, (d) *Khawali Badh* and (e) *Khoulobor Badh*. (Narzary 2018:92)

- a. *Agor Badh*: If one commits incest or sexual relationship with patrikin or matrikin; adultery with a person of the same community or a person belonging to another community or religion; an act of bestiality; physical assault on one’s mother, father or any elder member of the family.
- b. *Fhongslodh Badh*: This *Badh* covers the offences like touching any part of the body of a marriageable girl by any male member; causing physical harm or injury to a cow intentionally or otherwise involving one’s physical force.
- c. *Daoki Badh*: According to this *Badh*, no one is permitted to bring home any dead animal or its meat for consumption, if the animal were already partially eaten up by scavengers like a tiger, jackal, vulture etc.; if somebody consumes beef; a pig or a goat exchanged for a cow is not to be killed and consumed, because it tantamount to slaughtering and eating of the cow exchanged with; no one is supposed to charge for cutting or shaving someone’s head; a wife thrashing her husband and so on. Moreover, consuming food cooked by a person of any tribe other than his own is also treated as an offence. In a similar vein, people are forbidden to carry out trading enterprises in earthen pots, leather or fish.
- d. *Khawali Badh*: According to this *Badh*, if somebody collects materials given to the dead for domestic use; buying and reselling a cow or bullock at a profit within a year of its purchase; death of an ox while ploughing the land, pulling the cart etc.
- e. *Khoulobor Badh* (also known as *Laukhar Badh*): This *Badh* covers offences like abusing or insulting a person in bad languages; speaking a lie, giving false witness; and charging or accusing others without any reason.

According to the mythical narratives, it was *Mwnsingsing Bwrai*^{vi}, who introduced the system of *Badh* in the Bodo society. Just like Manu and Moses, *Mwnsingsing Bwrai* was the first lawgiver of the Bodo society at the time of existential crisis. The evolution of *Badh Kanti* opened a glorious chapter in the lives of the Bodo people. Hence, the popular saying goes - *Boroni badh kanti mwnba*, signifying that the atonement norms of Bodo people are five in number. Since then, all social crimes, sins or misdeeds in the Bodo society were brought under the jurisdiction of the *Badh Kanti*. Hence an offender/sinner (*badua*) has to expiate himself/herself according to the prescriptions underlined in the *Badh Kanti* or else he/she loses the right to live in the society. In this way, the people are forced to abstain from committing forbidden activities and this, in turn, helps the society to exist peacefully and prosperously.

The Process:

But the most conspicuous process of atonement is observed in *Agor badh*, the foremost of all *Badhs*. According to the folkloric accounts, one hut is built on the river bank with plantain leaves as its roof and wall materials. The wrongdoer or offender, whether a male or female or both are stripped of their clothes and required to remain virtually naked inside the hut with its door closed from outside. Fire is then set on the hut by the villagers or the *Douri* from outside from four directions. The offender, before being burnt up is required to come out of the hut in flames and jump into the river. The cloth is then supplied, and the offender is finally allowed to come out of the river wearing the dress. With the wet dress, the offender then proceeds to the makeshift altar of *Bathou Bwrai* constructed on the river bank. There, the offender is offered little drops of water mixed with cow dung, human excreta, as well as the droppings of the pigs, kept ready for the purpose. This mixture is usually given before the prayer to the *Bathou Bwrai*. It is generally believed that consumption of such mixtures makes the guilty person or offender free from sin again. Chanting of the *mantras* or incantations by the village *Ojha* and the sprinkling of *dwi gwtwr* (holy water) by *Douri* serves as a purificatory rite. Afterwards, Lord *Bathou Bwrai* and a host of other deities are propitiated by a series of sacrifices before which the offender kneels and entreats for deliverance from sin and guilt.

Moreover, the offender must also perform a 'bow method' of penance. According to this method, a guilty person has to shoot arrows tipped with some parts of the sacrificed meat with the aid of a bow in a given direction. In terms of *Agor Badh*, nine arrows are shot in the sky in the name of *Bathou Bwrai*. The process is consummated by the consumption of holy water or *dwi gwtwr* by the guilty person. In the above context, the burning of the hut symbolises him/her experiencing a symbolic death and coming out of the water signifies rebirth. Moreover, every house in the village is sprinkled with holy water and in this way, the villagers as a whole get purified and cleansed ceremoniously.

In terms of *Fhongslodh Badh*, the offender is required to wash himself in the river and followed by the sprinkling of holy water by the *Douri*. A pair of chickens and pigeons are sacrificed to *Bathou Bwrai* on a temporary altar constructed on a river bank, where the guilty person kneels and entreats for deliverance from sin and guilt. Here, the seven-bow method is usually followed, i.e., five arrows are shot in the air in the name of *Bathou Bwrai*, one arrow in the name of sixteen home deities and one in the name *hagrani mwdai* (sylvan deities).

The same methodology described above is usually applied to *Daokhi Badh* and *Khawali Badh*. However, if a cow faces death in one's hand intentionally or otherwise, (under *Khawali Badh*) then the person has

to tie the dead cow's rope to his neck and move around begging for seven days, visiting seven villages uttering *moo moo* like a cow. Thereafter, the person performs the ritual with the articles obtained from the begging. For *Daoki Badh*, five bow methods are applied. Here five arrows are shot in the air in honour of earth, water, fire, air, and sky. In the case of *Khawali Badh*, three bow methods are followed, where one arrow is shot in the name of *Bathou Bwrai* towards the east, one arrow is shot in the name of sixteen home deities towards the northern direction and finally, one arrow is shot in the name *hagrani mwdai* (sylvan deities) towards the south. But in the case of *Khoulabor Badh* (also known as *Laukhar Badh*) a simple repentance method is usually followed, i.e., sprinkling and drinking of *dwi gwtwr*. Sometimes fines or physical punishment or both are meted out to the offenders, in accordance with the degree of the offences committed, which is impartially decided by the village council. Feeding the village community is also a necessary part of the process of atonement. It is only after fulfilling all these, that an offender or a guilty person is believed to be free from sin or offence.

Salami, being a purificatory rite is performed by an individual in his homestead. It consists of two kinds – half *salami* and full *salami*. If *Bathou Bwrai*, *Mainao*^{vii} and *Songraja*^{viii} only are propitiated, then it is known as half *salami*. Whereas, when the sixteen deities are also propitiated alongside these three mentioned deities, then it is known as full *salami*. The sixteen deities are propitiated by sacrificing one chicken each. It is mostly performed after a marriage ceremony, post-funeral, after recovery of illness, after *Bwisagu*^{ix} festival etc., in order to retain the sanctity of a house.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, it can be argued that it is not a case of God being angry and needing to be pleased. It is a case of the human need to make a transfer of that which is evil in oneself to the sacrificial victims as a representative, so that in its death that part may be eliminated and flow away with the blood. Thus, the lesser divinities/spirits are looked upon with feelings of fear and awe.

Notes:

- ⁱ The traditional religion of Bodos
- ⁱⁱ The chief God of Bodos.
- ⁱⁱⁱ The mythical land of the Bodos
- ^{iv} The head priest.
- ^v The Assistant priest.
- ^{vi} The first human being as per Bodo folklore
- ^{vii} The chief Goddess.
- ^{viii} One of the gods of the Bodo pantheon.
- ^{ix} The springtime festival of Bodos.

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