



## Intangible dimension of the Kherai ritual site: an insight

### KEYWORDS

Heirophany, Deoshal, Kherai, Sali, Daudini, Lamphi

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### ABSTRACT

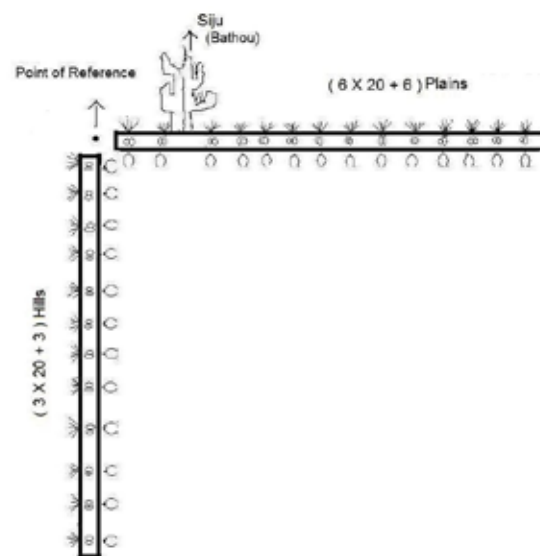
This paper will bring into focus the spirit of the sites that take precedence over the substance. The particular case presents a dominant community of the Brahmaputra family, the Bodos who form one of the main bases of the present day population tracts in the North-east India. Though Bodos were originally naturalists, through the ages a number of Bodo population has embraced modern religions like Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam. The celebration of Kherai, is an important annual festival of the Bodo community. Kherai recapitulates the major events in the life cycle of the Bodos. The overall structure of Kherai is symbolic, while its interior structure is dramatic. The two structures are integrated because they believed in dream time and their lives moved from ordinary to super-ordinary reality. Their imaginations, fantasies and the creative processes are dynamic ways of recollecting and tracing their histories for their identity.

This paper is an outcome of my continuous observation of the Kherai ritual of the Bodos. It is generated largely at the sub-conscious level, For us, it is simply a survival of primordial superstitions. These primordial practices and symbols provide a subconscious background to the Bodo religious system. It also integrates them into each other discarding their superficial sectarian contradictions. It validates the social value scheme with divine sanction and thus re-inforces the divine order. It also provides a scheme for man's place in the cosmos and explains some profound uncertainties of human experiences like success, death, failure disease and other calamities. Human-being is a symbol as well as a tool using creature, and he often returns to religion to satisfy his many and varied expressive and pragmatic needs.

Their dreams could come into fruition on the specific site or space known as Kherai-Sali. Kherai-Sali is the ritual altar site surrounding which all the activities takes place. The entire imagery of the village and the site is more important than the physical fabric-lessons acquired from the nature. The parallels between the spiritual world and reality influence the earthen altar which is a supreme guarantor of the community as represented by a tree or a shrine.

The schematic representation of the Kherai Sali (arena) where the sacred spaces and ritual performances are transformed from ritual context to performance context. The performers engage themselves in the ritual activity conceiving in terms of a presentation of the real. Consequently, these sites are envisaged in terms of sacred space and ritual performances, rather as something new. The way the Bodo community visualizes the arena has its own significance. It is believed that the right angle altar symbolizes a holy road from the heaven to the earth or from earth to heaven. The ideal of the philosophy here indicates a holy-link between the god of the heaven and the human beings of the earth.

The Kherai Sali acts as a architectural signifier of sacred space and constitutes in exhaustible funds of otherness. As such space has no physical attribute. Sacred spaces located in a geographical space are often identified by particular signifiers, such as the Kherai altar which shows the physical walking possible through pathlike or road like structure. The discussion focuses on the performance of the Kherai puja in the physical space. The connotation of the word 'Kherai' is khe means sky and rai means to invoke. The gods and the goddesses are invited to the earth to take offerings offered to them. The entire Sali becomes an alternative cosmos breaking the continuity of profane space. It also cuts an opening for communication between the cosmic planes.



Schematic representation of Kherai Altar

Illustration no.-1

The hierophany (capacity of the sacred to appear in the midst of the profane.) of the space marks the sacredness of Kherai. The exact area is divided into two dimensions: horizontal and vertical. The horizontal communicating the hills and the vertical communicating the plains. A large number of gods and goddesses almost numbering 189 are propitiated during Kherai. On the vertical side (3x20+3) and on the horizontal side (eastern), (6x20 + 6) (northern) various gods and goddesses are worshipped. The nature and attributes of the deities, except for the presiding deity Bathou is not known. The manner and process through which offerings are made is based on the hierarchy of the gods. The laizams (offerings) are spread out. The deities are basically the nature counterparts like rivers, streams, rivulets, ghosts, spirits ponds, attendants of Bathou, every element that has made an impact on the life and culture of the Bodos is given a reverential seat in the altar. This also speaks of the permanence of Bathou foundation, though in a changed form. even art is not destroyed but is being transferred to the praxis of life. There is nothing more timely than the truth which is timeless, this is the message that comes from the tradition and it is relevant at all times.

It is very interesting to note that the historical fact and route available quotes that the king Naranarayana, though he was

a patron of the neo-vaishnavite cult, did not disturb the Bodo-kacharis who followed their own system of worship. They worshipped Bathou as per their own

ideology. He divided the area into two, keeping Gohain Kamal Ali (a road by the name Gohain Kamal Ali in the middle).

Gohain kamal ali maddhey sima kari  
Uttar phale aashe jotek kachari  
Sehi phale debalay ashe jate jate  
Kochi mech pujibek muhur bukut  
Dakhinar phale puja bahmane karibo  
Ahi nibhandane sobe dharmaprabartiba

This can also be taken as a probable narrative from Darrang Rajvamsavali to support the origin of the Kherai arena.

The ritual altar in the physical world is often demarcated from the regular space by architectural signifiers. Notwithstanding, that the site has zero per cent originality in terms of material although again having 100 per cent originality in setting because the site has remained the same for over many years. While the site inherits and transmits everlasting wisdom, the fact remains it lacks material authenticity. In fact, it retains spiritual purity because the material is almost new and therefore suitable for the divine powers. The Kherai ritual altar is not a tangible property but a unique example of a living tradition of a site whose value is not defined by the criteria of the material.

The authenticity of the setting is equally challenged because the location of the sacred tree and the ritual altar has spatial rules. Many a times settings have been changed or sites have been shifted. Many sites have been shifted several times depending on circumstances, e.g. at the appointment of the new priest, change of ritual accompanists, new shaman dancer. The fundamental question that is raised in such societies is of tangible heritage. It certainly demolishes the notion of intrinsic values, that are the sense of authenticity. These are may be the issues that accelerated the move towards a reconciliation with the tangible heritage.

It is quite clear that values could only be culturally determined by understanding the sources of those values. Though there were memory restrictions, memory shifts or memory loss the community tried the method of remembrance in natural context. They would jump, sing, dance and deflect their bodies as if they are going to create and present something new.

Consequently, we need to understand sacred site as process and encounter, rather than simply as place or structure. This raises the possibility that different forms of encounter might be regarded as instrumental in construction of sacred site. The varied images that Kherai presents as remarkable encounters are various feats of Daudini. The various actions or dance-like movements of the priestess in the ritual site include:-

- i) the serene and calm-looking Daudini enters the arena after a ritual bath, washes her feet, touches the ground and is seated by her attendants. syllables of hari-bol fill the air.
- ii) The lamphi helps Daudini to get dressed, hair is oiled, combed and vermilion is put on her hair parting, colour is smeared on the cheeks too.
- iii) Ritual ornaments are specially worn at the altar.
- iv) Invocatory music is played on the kham accompanied by siphung and jotha, it also marks beginning of Kherai and sanctification of the entire environment.
- v) Daudini marks the opening by standing on low stool and performs movement which purify her ritual dress that embodies the shamanistic spirit.
- vi) She sanctifies herself by putting a burning wick in her mouth which also testifies her supernatural strength.

The various encounters in the ritual site include:-

- i) Daudini's fight with the various spirits and evils

- ii) consuming blood in one go
- iii) lay unconscious if not able to drink blood
- iv) plays with the wild bear and finally overpowers him
- v) in spite of the deadly ants (amroli) she manages to climb down the hill
- vi) she tears off the neck of the sparrow with her teeth
- vii) kills bird with a single arrow
- viii) The most interesting grand-finale of the ritual is when Daudini tries to dispirit herself. a band of young boys numbering around ten hold her from the back as Daudini tries to exert her strength and tries to leave her sacred body and becomes a normal person once again. This is a much awaited sequence and it bears testimony to the sacredness of Kherai. she is lifted up and all her accessories are taken out or it is believed that if the ritual time passes out in the ritual arena she will lose her life.

Barring the properties of human perception, the phenomenological conception of space cannot be considered independently. Humans not only perceive space in a passive sense but also move through space in an active sense. The ritual site is cleaned and made normal as it was before. Here, what is important is the various aspects of the spatial experience.

The Daudini's very presence in the ritual arena is in an active sense. She experiences various aspects of spatial experience. The perception of space (primarily a visual and aural experience), being in space (movement in space) and practice of space (interacting with the objects of space, the nature, the landscape, streams and streamlets). An ambivalent relationship between man and nature is evident here. Certainly, more than anything else, these sites promote social solidarity. These sites also become a platform where a big group (audience) can see a small group (ritual performers) and become aware of itself at the same time. Given an alternative these rituals cannot be performed at a different site than this. The entire landscape is as important as the ritual. The community members are fully aware of their surroundings, instinctually sensible of the critical distance they maintain from possible dangers. Through their bodies they intimately intermingled with nature. The community tries to perceive space as a horizon peopled with familiar beings whose distances and directions are impregnated with meanings, rather than the empty receptacle in which objects are located space begins to appear as something which is given by the relation of the past history, relation of the trees and houses, mountains and rivers which define their (community's) possibility of vision and movement. In addition to that there are accustomed pathways, some the community takes for habit and convenience and some are chosen for aesthetic quality or because they follow an historic route. For e.g. an old tree by the side of a pond which has seen ages of this village.

Kherai is a communicative event, unfolding many an ethos and reflections of the Bodo society. It is a simple form of communication that combines the visual, kinesthetic (deflections and inter-semiotic translations) and aesthetic aspects of the human movement with the aural dimension of Bodo musical sense. It is created out of the culturally understood symbols within the social and religious context. It conveys meaning and information as ritual, ceremony and entertainment. For the medium to communicate, it abides all such cultural conventions that deal with human movement in time and space (to greet, to tell, to pray and knowledge of fundamental cultural norms). Dance is represented here as a community's expression of its values, identity or resistance to extend pressure. Dance is nonetheless an important activity across such societies.

Kherai an important ritual of the Bodos is partially tangible and upto a large extent is an intangible heritage. Kherai can be termed as a dynamic process which grows and develops, and interacts with the environment too. This is one way to support traditional tribal cultures which might be of some help to tribal people to integrate their traditional cultures, with the new urban world. In, other words like most of the people, Bodos are also fond of the recent developments taking place in the society.

In order to detect these creative processes, observation of techniques and practices related to the memorial, codification, memorization and transmission are our main focusses. Various forms of interaction are observed and analyzed as narratives while rituals and other formal speech acts are analyzed as performances. The use of miscellaneous supports—gestures, motions and movements; voices, rhythms and melodies is taken into account. This paper looks into the role of Doudini's (priestess) dance i.e. seen as a form of evasion and an opportunity for fantasy, as the dancer is both out of control and therefore out of reach of controlling forces. Dance is seen here simultaneously as a dramatic display of the self and the body, with an equally dramatic negation of the self and the body. The various processes are dynamic ways of generating, playing, evaluating, repeating and remembering. The creative processes are important for the performance. The dancer tries to relate to the time and space in which the ritual is being enacted.

The first ritual dance that sets the trend of the Kherai ritual is the (bathou dumonai mosanai) which depicts the various stages of before the creation of the universe, the stages being— a form of a fry, a form of turtle, a baby of wild boar who keeps itself to the brim of the womb to attain life and to attain the process of procreation. The entire act is vague and abstract. There is no demonstration of the following stages. But it is assumed the creation process is going on. The formless god is imagined within the five ridges of the khanglary (bamboo) pairs to prepare the Bathou altar. Another ritual (bathou kharnai mosanai) depicts the raising of the altar and sprinkling holy water symbolizes purification of your inner-self before the commencement of the ritual. In (paizam banai mosanai) one is expected to bend his knees and initiate gods services thereafter. (bathou gidingnai) depicts all the stages of life for e.g. childhood and youth, (kherai golao) depicts the significance of creation that has been known but as people have a temporary existence one must live life to its fullest extent. There is high spirited sound of the drums (khams) which make people (audience) participate in the dance. (Gandula bonnai mosanai) depicts how the guali insect cannot fold its wings so keeps hopping from one place to another. Man also with disinterested contemplation moves from one place to another, the entire sequence is a dance of leaps and hops in slow fragmented movements. The entire ritual is demonstrated through dance. The text of the performance is redundant in the folk idiom.

This ritual being mostly danced gives an opportunity to the audience to see their own lives being acted out. They can fantasize, draw upon their imaginations, take recourse to tradition, trace their histories and innovate upon the missing links. Their knowledge is based on personally formed values. The whole idea is primarily concerned with creating and facilitating dance with participating individuals and groups. However, this is also true that by giving the participants a sense of their own abilities, by enabling them to create material by themselves helped to build in those individuals a sense of agency. It also gave them an opportunity to create their own phrases of movements and also empower participants and brings value to what they achieve. The notion that arts bring benefit to individuals and communities, even contribute to social cohesion and social justice can be understood by the following examples. During the ritual the old Kham (drum) player was seen disturbed by the wrong beats played by the young man at the ritual site.

As the old man was too feeble to walk, he took support of the young man and almost climbed on to his back and corrected his wrong beats. He was too disturbed that the ritual was in progress and the young man was not able to set the music right. He also complained that the present generation is not taking sufficient efforts to learn about their own heritage. The question of heritage to be passed on to posterity and the values to be transmitted to future generations. If values were there in the physical property per se, what message was being passed on and why? The primary aim of the conservation was to safeguard the quality the values of the resource, pro-

tect material substance and ensure integrity for posterity. In fact, cultural heritage should speak through the values that people give it and not the other way round. These tangible can be understood only through the intangible society and values are thus intrinsically linked,

In the case of Kherai celebration the ritual site of the right angle space structure is also in itself supportive. Usually, situated in an open field or the courtyard of the temple (deoshal) or any such clearing which is used by the communities for festivals, assemblies, holding of rituals and for entertainment also. These are not the permanent sites for any of the events. But when used attract large number of crowds and the spaces are uniquely organized. These are the sites where reality is being performed. As the case with the Bodo community, it is said that Kherai was always performed in out in the open. But with times changing it was felt that in essence the issue of cultural heritage becomes intrinsically linked to issues of values and such values highly profiled the physical attributes. Nowadays, it is seen that the entire ritual is acted out in the deosal (sacrificial house) first and then it is enacted in the open for the public to participate. People are seen more rejuvenated and re-affirmed of their moral values in the outer spaces. These namghars and deoshals are physical manifestations of the religious feelings which people find easy to associate themselves. The ritual performed outside fosters celebratory and ceremonial feelings amongst the community. The road to that truth was opened up for those involved in the conservation of the tangible heritage. This is a question that constantly confronted conservators when dealing with material heritage. The real truth lies in the intangible heritage.

The living traditions become more meaningful and represent culture in the truest sense. For e.g. the changes that have been observed in the Kherai festival like in some areas of Bodo concentration Bali Bathou (sacrifice) is being replaced by Phool Bathou (flowers). The consequence may be that the performance part which comprises of music, dances, mimetic acts and the emergent dimension of the ritual may come to an end within a decade or so. It aims at the emergent shift from the physical (object-oriented) focus to peoples performance approach in which the intangible heritage is invariably connected. Though the effort and approach of some conservators or NGOs is at present is to preserve every possible matter related to the ritual for e.g. ritual dress, implements, ornaments, musical instruments and other important things in the village itself where the community can have an access to it. The visitors can also pay a visit to the village. Still, this was not agreed by many as they thought that the only medium of faith which had celebration and rejuvenation will no more be there. The village people are in a fix as to what they should do to save their only roots which reflects their identity. Since the ways of life of the community people are always in simple formats their ways of lives have been ignored. These lives were masterpieces not in terms of expression; but as a philosophy. It also speaks of authenticity as a means of the ability to perceive truthfulness, the genuineness, the completeness of the values carried by our heritage as expressed through its attributes.

Another 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". It is apprehended through its diverse manifestation, which Eliade calls 'hierophanies'. Here in this case the tree becoming a hierophany, 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.

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

remains a part of the worldly environment. In some respect ,every hierophany expresses an incomprehensible paradox arising from the great mystery upon which every hierophany is centered.

To conclude , we can say that this vibrant intangible cultural heritage must be incarnate in tangible manifestations ,if conservation is practiced. " Intangible heritage " because of its very nature as a map through which humanity interprets , se-

lects, reproduces, and disseminates cultural heritage which is an important part of tangible heritage . More important because it is a tool through which the tangible heritage could be defined and expressed (thus) transforming inert landscapes of objects and monuments turning them into living archives of cultural values. More over , the recurrent theme remains that societies ,norms and values are at the core of it all.

There will be a day perhaps, when new conventions will be amplified to recognize the intangible natural heritage.

#### Notes

- i) The data analysed in this paper is collected from a village namely Dhekidol in Sonitpur district of Assam state.
- ii) The abovesaid observations were made during field-study in a Bodo village . The kherai ritual was made in the month of March 2008, with much resentment. Expenses for organizing the festival were too meager. Event time was cancelled thrice.
- iii) Due to the non-availability of the traditional priestess (daudini) they thought of managing the event with a proxy. But thought it was too early to drop the traditional practice. Somehow they arranged for the money and finally daudini agreed.
- iv) My principal informant , Sri Tajuram Narzari a community elder tried to convince me by showing his family genealogy, which said that some 100 years ago , an ahom elder(Bura) from Sibasagar settled in this village and married a Bodo girl. Since then is Kherai celebrated. There stood a big tree trunk on which was inscribed some letters regarding the ancestors. The tree was chopped by the villagers for wood. The place where tree stands a namghar (prayerhall) has been built. The tree's half part is cemented with a column which stands inside the namghar . Community feels as if the tree stands as a testimony to their heritage.

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