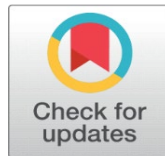
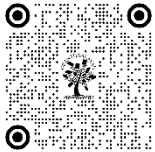


BWISAGU: AN ETHNIC IDENTITY OF COLORS AND FLAVOUR OF THE BODOS OF KOKRAJHAR DISTRICT, ASSAM

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Received 01 May 2024
Accepted 04 July 2024
Published 10 July 2024

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DOI
[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i2.2024.1227](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i2.2024.1227)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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ABSTRACT

Bwisagu is the springtime festival of the Bodo community that marks the beginning of the New Year. The Bodos belongs to the Indo-Mongolian family and they are one of the prominent indigenous tribe in Assam. The Bodos are predominantly agriculturists, and most of their religious activity, fairs, and festivals depend on agriculture. Most of the festive celebration is based on harvests, paddy planting, and the lunar calendar. Festivals are associated with dance, music, and food items, which are part of their cultural identity. The *Bwisagu* festival is associated with the Bihu festival of the Assamese people. There are many rituals and ceremonies associated with the *Bwisagu* festival that are performed before and after the celebration of festivals.

Bwisagu festival holds significant importance among the Bodo community as one of the most revered celebrations. The primary focus of this research paper is to shed light on the festivities surrounding the *Bwisagu* festival and its evolving customs. *Bwisagu*, a spring festival is commemorated under different names by various Indian communities. This paper delves into the details of the *Bwisagu* festival, exploring aspects such as observance practices, its ties to religion and agriculture as well as the traditional attire, colour and flavour worn during this festive occasion in a comprehensive manner.

Keywords: Bodo, *Bwisagu*, Bihu, Ethnic Identity, Colour, Flavour

1. INTRODUCTION

The Bodos, an ethnic group from Assam, are a prominent branch of the Mongolian race that migrated from China, Tibet, and Burma [Brahma \(2009\)](#). They enjoy living peacefully, engaging in merrymaking, and celebrating various festivals. Among these festivals, the *Bwisagu* holds significant importance as it is celebrated during the spring season, symbolizing the fusion of agriculture and religion. As the beauty of nature blossoms in spring, the hearts and souls of the Bodo people are filled with joy, leading to the emergence of singing and dancing among them.

According to Sydney Endle, "Among the Darang Kacharis (Bodos of Darang district), this festival lasts for seven days during which little or no work is done, the whole period being given up to merry-making, dancing, feasting etc. The *Bwisagu* festival thus exemplifies a key cultural and religious aspect within the Bodo community, showcasing their rich traditional heritage. However, the celebration of the *Bwisagu* festival has undergone certain alterations due to the influences of globalization, mirroring the efforts of the Bodos, like other societies worldwide, to exhibit their cultural identity through this festival whilst adapting to modern changes.

1.1. BACKGROUND

The Bodos are the largest tribal community in present-day Assam, numbering around 1.3 million according to the 2011 Census [Sharma & Sharma \(2005\)](#). They are part of the Indo-Mongoloid and Kirata ethnic groups. Throughout history, they have been referred to by various names such as Kiratas and Indo- Mongloids in ancient texts, and Asura or Danava in prehistoric accounts by neighboring communities.

Today, they are known by different names in different regions of India, like Tipras or Borok in Tripura, Meches in West Bengal, Bodo Kocharies, Bodos or Bodos in Assam, and Dimacha or Dimacha Kocharies in the North Cachar district of Assam. However, regardless of the names used by others or the regions they reside in, they identify themselves primarily as Bodo. In their written documents for community identification in Assam, they refer to themselves as Bodo-Kochari [Endle \(2007\)](#).

1.2. OBJECTIVES

- To study the events and ceremonies associated with the *Bwisagu* festival.
- To study the folk dance and music associated with the *Bwisagu* festival.
- To study the indigenous foods associated with different days of the *Bwisagu* festival.
- To study how modernization and globalization affect the different trends of *Bwisagu* celebration.

2. METHODOLOGY

The present study is based on both primary and secondary data. For primary data collection of this paper, field work was carried out in the selected villages of Kokrajhar district during the period of April May month in 2023. The selection of the villages was done on the basis of predominantly inhabited by Bodo population. For the present study, data were collected from the following four villages viz., Ramphalbil, Kolaigaon, Bhorguri, Bajugaon under two development blocks viz., Datoma block and Kacugaon block of Kokrajhar district. Primary data are collected through interview and observation methods. Semi-structured interviews were used for data collection from the selected households. Participant observation was also used to gather data from the study population. For secondary data, books, journals, research articles are referred. [Barua \(1986\)](#)

3. RESULTS

The primary event for celebration in the social life of the Bodo community is the observance of '*Bwisagu*' during the month of Baisakh, which falls in the mid-April (during the spring season). Referred to as 'Bihu' by the Assamese, this festival

is eagerly embraced by all members of the Bodo community, marking the beginning of the New Year.

3.1. THE ORIGIN OF THE TERM '*BWISAGU*'

The exact etymology of the word '*Bwisagu*' remains unclear until today. The *Bwisagu* festival has been celebrated by the Bodo community since ancient times, yet the precise meaning of the term '*Bwisagu*' remains elusive. Various critics and scholars have provided different interpretations of the word '*Bwisagu*'.

According to Kamini Narzari, the term '*Bwisagu*' is a Bodo term derived from 'Bwisa,' meaning year or age, and 'Agu,' meaning start. Therefore, 'Bwisa + Agu > *Bwisagu*' signifies the beginning of a new year or age. Laksheswar Brahma proposes that '*Bwisagu*' originates from 'Bwisag + hu > *Bwisagu*,' indicating worship or offerings to deities. This is because every Bodo individual offers prayers to the family deity during the Assamese New Year, Bohag. Dr. Kameswar Brahma explains that the *Bwisagu* festival, celebrated during the springtime in the Assamese month of Bohag, is referred to as Bwisag. The early timing of this festival in the first month of the year led to its name as 'Bwisag + Agu > *Bwisagu*'. According to Dr. Mangalsing Hazoari, '*Bwisagu*' translates to 'bwswniagu,' meaning the beginning of the year [Nazaree \(2005\)](#).

The *Bwisagu* festival is traditionally observed at the start of the Assamese month of Bohag, known as Bwisag among the Bodo community. Despite the critics' associations of the term '*Bwisagu*' with Bwisakh or Bohag, the first month names in Bengali and Assamese, the Bodo people have historically celebrated numerous festivals not following the year counting systems. Sydney Endle reports that during a seven-day festival among the Darang Kacharis (Bodo people of Darrang district), little to no work is done. The entire period is dedicated to joyful activities like merry-making, dancing, and feasting. Similar to their Hindu neighbours, on the first day of the festival all livestock is taken to the closest river or pond for a ceremonial bath. They are then sprinkled with a mixture of rice beer (Jou), tomatoes, and turmeric. The cattle's horns are oiled, and a mixture of ash and pounded rice flour is applied to their bodies. Once this ritual is completed, the community immerses themselves in pure enjoyment, with the younger members indulging in dancing and singing [Endle \(2007\)](#).

The Bodos observe the *Bwisagu* festival on the first day of the month of Bohag or Bwisakh of the Assamese or Bengali calendar, usually in mid-April. This festival lasts for up to seven days, though traditionally, the Bodos used to celebrate *Bwisagu* throughout the entire month of Bohag. The *Bwisagu* festivities are mainly divided into two parts viz., a) Cattle rites known as 'Mwsou Thukhwinai' and b) Human's *Bwisagu* called 'Mansini *Bwisagu*'

1) Cattle rites (Mwsou Thukhwinai)

The Cattle Rites, known as Mwsuo Thukhwinai, holds a significant place in the *Bwisagu* festival. This ritual takes place on the final day of the Chait month, around mid-April. During the Cattle rites day, the Bodos perform specific rituals by bathing all their cattle in tanks or rivers. Prior to the event, the necessary materials like Khathri bibar (lingam black turmeric plant's flower), Mwkhwana bibar (a kind of flower plants), Dighloti laothi, Raidwng bilai, Lao, Phanthao, and Haldwi are gathered. On the ritual day morning, family members gather these materials, carve gourds and brinjals into round shapes, and create garlands with bamboo ropes. These garlands are then placed around the cattle's necks, and their bodies are marked with black spots made from Eri tree stems mixed with black ashes and

mustard oil. Slowly, the cattle are led from the cowshed to the riverbank or pond by gently prodding them with the Digiliti stick, and cowherds toss gourd and brinjal pieces on to the cattle's bodies. In this time cow herder singing a song and the cows are bathed [Bodo \(2014\)](#).

After removing the cows from the cowshed, the family member cleans out the cow dung and tidies up the shed. Later in the evening, the old ropes are swapped with new ones. This marks the completion of the Mwsou Thukhwinai (cattle rites). Following this, the Mansini *Bwisagu* festivities kick off the next morning after the cattle rites.

2) Human's *Bwisagu* (Mansini *Bwisagu*)

During the week-long celebration of *Bwisagu* each and every member of the community shared their joy, and the festivities follow a structured sequence. The initial day honors the cattle in a festivity called music, while the subsequent day, known as mansi, focuses on humanity but commences with the worship of deities. Following that, the third day is dedicated to Swima, celebrating the significance of dogs. First four initial days are dedicated to pigs, followed by the fifth day where, pigs, and birds are included. Moving on to the sixth day, it is specifically for ducks and other avian species. Finally, the seventh day is reserved for welcoming family and friends and planting rice. In the *Bwisagu* festival, there is a belief among some Hindu scholars that the tradition of cow veneration was influenced by Hindus. However, certain Bodo intellectuals disagree with this notion. Throughout history, the Bodo people have relied on cows for cultivating paddy fields, harvesting food, and cultivating various vegetables. Even today, they maintain a deep dependency on cows within their agricultural society. As a result, cows hold a sacred status and are regarded with higher esteem than any other domesticated animal in their cultural framework.

3.2. MUSIC AND DANCE DURING *BWISAGU* FESTIVAL

The Bodos commence the *Bwisagu* celebration by playing drums or flutes as part of their tradition. On the first day of *Bwisagu*, in the early morning, a drummer or flautist delivers a *Bwisagu* message by playing these instruments for all the villagers. Upon hearing this message, the villagers gather at the village headman's house or a public area along with their musical instruments. They place all the instruments in front of the Bathou (God) and offer prayers for well-being. There is a belief that by praying to God, the instruments will function smoothly during the *Bwisagu* celebration. Subsequently, the celebration begins at the village headman's house or the public space with dancing, singing, and playing traditional instruments.

The villagers gather in different groups based on age the elderly, youth, and children to participate in traditional dancing. Right from the start, they commence their singing and dancing routine, going from house to house, where the residents offer those drinks, meat, and various edibles. Alongside these offerings, valuable items like rice and cash a real so presented to the dancers. In their customs, the Bodos practice a *Bwisagu* dance known as 'Mainao Sokhnonai (means begging the wealth) which translates to seeking prosperity through dance [Nazaree \(2019\)](#)

The children, young girls, boys, elders, and women joyfully participate in singing the beautiful *Bwisagu* songs and dancing to the rhythms of musical instruments played by men, including the Kham (a kind of drum made of 3.4 feet wood and animal skin), Siphung (bamboo flute), Jabkhring (metallic tambourine), Jotha (cymbals), Serja (a traditional Bodo musical instrument similar to a modern violin), and Gongona (harp made of bamboo splits) [Swargiary \(2022\)](#). Through the

expressive *Bwisagu* songs, young boys and girls convey feelings of pure joy and happiness. These songs reflect the significance of women, as well as aspects of nature, labor, affection, weaving, remorse, humor, and more [Sen \(1999\)](#). These songs are incomplete without the presence of women. As they dance and sing, they may request donations of rice, money, eggs, etc., from their families if possible. Currently, the *Bwisagu* festival, once a seven-day event, has been condensed to one or two days, held in an open field. This festival embodies the love for nature, unity, and harmony among diverse groups of people, carrying on the rich.

Figure 1



Figure 1 Traditional Musical Instruments of the Bodos

Source Field visit at Kokrajhar

Figure 2



Figure 2 Traditional Bodo Dance Performed During *Bwisagu* Festival

Source Field Visit

3.3. DRESS AND ORNAMENTS

During the festival, Bodo women often wear colourful traditional dresses made from naturally occurring colors. The Dokkhona, their customary attire, consists mainly of yellow, green, red, and blue hues. They adorn a long scarf known as Zwmgra, which is intricately embroidered with various colors. Along with the evolution of dance styles, there have been notable changes in dress and makeup, leading to a more standardized costume. This evolution has brought in modern

choreographers who have introduced alterations in costumes and makeup, sometimes necessitating complete wardrobe change for each dance segment.

Figure 3



Figure 3 Bodo Male and Female with Traditional Dress

Source Field Visit at Kokrajhar

During the *Bwisagu* Festival, the Bodos opt for minimal ornamentation and simple ornaments like phurkhuri or kheru (a gold ear ornament), Japkhiring (a gold earring), and small flower earrings are commonly worn. Some Bodo women also wear a delicate gold nose ornament known as Nakhaphul. Necklaces worn during *Bwisagu* are modest, usually made of gold or silver. Additionally, simple bangles made of gold or silver are worn as hand ornaments.

3.4. FOOD ASSOCIATED WITH FESTIVAL

There are some customary beliefs associated with the food habits and *Bwisagu* festival among the Bodo community. On the first day of *Bwisagu*, after the ritual of cattle baths, the cattle are allowed to roam freely in the grazing fields on that particular day. Among the Bodos, there is a custom to consume Khungkha - a special curry comprised of over 100 diverse leaves and fruits from the forest and local surroundings are prepared during the Mansini *Bwisagu* festival. Khungkha is meticulously prepared and gathered by the women of the community. The Bodos view Khungkha as a form of herbal medicine, believing it possesses the power to heal various ailments in the human body. As evening approaches, the women diligently clean and rearrange the cowsheds. They offer prayers and blessings, seeking prosperity for the cattle by symbolically tying them with fresh ropes.

Some of the important foods associated with *Bwisagu* festivals are:

- 1) **Rice beer (Jou Bishi /Jou Bwrai):** A traditional rice beer prepared from fermented rice. It is a community favorite and a mainstay of the *Bwisagu* festival,
- 2) **Onla curry:** A popular dish made with chicken and rice powder is called onla. Bamboo shoots are used in cooking, giving the meal a distinct flavour.
- 3) **Narzi curry:** Jute leaves are dried and used to make the dish narzi. It is usually served with pig or other meats.
- 4) **Dohneiong:** Black sesame seed curry, or dohneiiong, is frequently made with pork. The curry gets its black colour and rich, nutty flavour from the sesame seeds.

- 5) **Wuthi Wungal:** A classic dish prepared with pork and leafy greens is called wuthiwungal.
- 6) **Silk warm fry:** During the *Bwisagu* festival, silkworms are frequently devoured and are regarded as a delicacy.
- 7) **Curry with Fish:** Another staple of Bodo food is fish, and different fish curries are made for the *Bwisagu* festival. Frequently, native herbs and spices are included in these curries.
- 8) **Ladu:** During the event, ladu, or traditional sweets made with rice flour, coconut, and jiggery are frequently created. These desserts are a staple of the festive culinary offerings.
- 9) **Rice cake (pitha):** a special class of rice preparations cake is called pitha. they prepared various types of rice cake like laodumpitha, enthaabpitha, annasipitha, assipitha, hasung pitha, Engkhrong pitha etc. on the occasion of *Bwisagu*.
- 10) **Bitter-sour curry (Gwkha-gwkhwi-khaji-janai):** Bodos have customs around this bitter-sour vegetable curry in *Bwisagu*. They gathered bitter-tasting woodland vegetables and cooked them with chicken and pork. They believed that if a person eats this food during *Bwisagu*, he/she will be protected from other diseases.

4. DISCUSSION

Bwisagu Festival: Changes and Continuity

During the field work it was observed that a small group of Bodo population, particularly those who follow Christianity and different sects of Hinduism, abandoning certain traditions. Kalicharan Mech, a faithful follower of Srimanth Paramhangsa Sibnarayan Swami from Calcutta, initiated the Brahma religious movement among the Bodos in the latter part of the twentieth century. It aimed to introduce the religious principles of Brahmanism to the Non-Hindu Mongoloid Bodo community in Assam by relinquishing their traditional animistic beliefs. They even adopted the surname Brahma instead of Mech. Followers of the Brahma religion also ceased their traditional worship practices and the use of ancestral musical instruments. The ethnic movement initiated by the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU), the Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS), and other nationalist groups led to the construction of a Community prayer hall known as a Brahma Mandir, where locals started observing the *Bwisagu* festival by offerings of fruits and flowers for the well-being of the native people living in the locality. It is worth mentioning that they refrained from using their traditional musical instruments within the mandir, although they have resumed playing them during the *Bwisagu* song and performances in the community.

Due to the impact of cultural change among the various communities of India, transformation in the folk performance arts of the Bodo community have also been taking place nowadays. The songs and dances associated to the *Bwisagu* festivities have been passed down from one generation to another since long time. Some of the tunes are primarily focused on wishing for a joyful fresh year or illustrating the typical farmer's daily life. Certain tunes are mushy poems to boys that highlight the singer's aspirations and visions. Females and males dances in distinctive but equivalent roles in the *Bwisagu* dance. Girls usually form neat lines or circles. The Bodo musicians, similar to what they do in the brief competition, are the initial to step into the dance zone, resulting in male and female dancers. The dance is majorly

characterized by fixed bodily stances, incorporating particular hand, hip, arm, swirl, squat, and bend motions.

There is a shift in the types of food prepared during the *Bwisagu* festival now a days. They prepare new variety of dishes such as pithas (cakes), narikholni ladu (coconut ball), and sourai ladu (sticky rice ball). Additionally, milk and black tea are now popular beverages served to guests. Interestingly, some individuals have abandoned the tradition of consuming rice beer during the *Bwisagu* festival and other celebrations, instead, they find joy in singing and dancing together. Bodos uphold a diverse traditional cuisine that reflects their cultural heritage. Despite having a wide variety of traditional dishes, new food varieties are occasionally introduced, possibly due to globalization and the influence of neighboring communities. Over time, some traditional items are disappearing, putting the Bodo identity at risk. It is crucial for us to preserve our traditional food practices in our daily lives.

Globalization has significantly altered the dietary habits of tribes, leading to a shift from tradition to modernity in fused with different elements. The Bodo kitchen now show cases a blend of traditional dishes are alongside modern options like McDonald's and KFC, highlighting the impact of culinary globalization.

Similarly, performers of *Bwisagu* adhere to a specific sequence when they are on stage. Some individuals however, do not engage with the musical groups rather they remain engaged with their own music of their choice. Nonetheless, in informal *Bwisagu* dance competitions, certain guidelines and regulations regarding the use of traditional elements related to the *Bwisagu* festival must be followed and preserved.

4.1. CUSTOMARY BELIEVES ASSOCIATED WITH *BWISAGU* FESTIVALS

The Bodos hold customary beliefs and faiths connected to the *Bwisagu* festival. These beliefs are not considered taboo but instead serve as guiding principles for the uneducated, innocent, economically deprived communities dependent on agriculture. What makes these beliefs remarkable is their customary and traditional nature, contrasting with the modern, science-driven attitudes. Nevertheless, they hold special significance among the Bodo people dating back to ancient times [Brahma \(2008\)](#).

Some of the customary beliefs and faiths are discussed below-

- 1) The Bodo community refers to the last day of the Assamese month of Chot as *Bwisagu*, a day dedicated to honoring cattle. On this occasion, the cattle are revered and protected from being struck by sticks.
- 2) The Bodos have a long-standing belief that during the *Bwisagu* festival, no arguments should occur. There is a strong belief that individuals who engage in disputes during this period will be reborn as cows or dogs in their next life. As a result, they make a conscious effort to avoid any form of conflict throughout the *Bwisagu* festival.
- 3) First day of Bohag month, family members gather to offer prayers to Bathou after completing house cleaning and purification rituals through bathing [Basumatary \(2016\)](#). They seek blessings from the Bwrai Bathou Maharaza (the community god), for abundance and growth in agriculture. Their prayers are focused on well-being in the upcoming New Year as they bid farewell to the old one.

- 4) During the *Bwisagu* festival, the Bodos refrain from utilizing the granary. All form soft trade, including the milling of rice, are prohibited throughout *Bwisagu* festive period.
- 5) On the first day of the New Year, the Bodo women visit the house of the Oza or the traditional medicine man. During the visit, they carry Zou, a local rice beer, and roosters as offerings.
- 6) The Bodos have a tradition of consuming ceremonial meals featuring fowl or meats prepared with a bitter harp spice called 'Khungkha'. Instead, they can also have seven other wild vegetables with various Flavors as ceremonial meals.
- 7) On the seventh day of the *Bwisagu* festival, the Bodo community conducts a ceremonial cleaning of their houses, takes a purifying bath, and asks for forgiveness from the elders for any mistakes or wrongdoings that may have occurred during the festival period.
- 8) The Bodos believe that consuming vegetables such as gourd and brinjal during the Mwsou Bihu festival should be avoided throughout the entire month of *Bwisakh*. Historically, the Bodo people would completely rid themselves of these vegetables after the Mwsouni *Bwisagu* celebration. They hold the belief that partaking in gourd and brinjal post- *Bwisagu* symbolizes a transformation into animals and the belief remains prevalent within their community till today.
- 9) There is a cultural restriction when it comes to using Kham (a kind of drum) in the *Bwisagu* dance for those who follow Brahmanism. Instead, they opt for a smaller drum while participating in the *Bwisagu* festival.
- 10) According to their traditional belief, they throw away their old earthen utensils for cooking purpose on the first day of the *Bwisagu*.

5. CONCLUSION

Since ancient times, the Bodo people have held the *Bwisagu* festival in high regard, considering it their most significant event. The *Bwisagu* celebration is the reflections of the socio-cultural life of the Bodos. Despite being of diverse religious, they strive to maintain this tradition by their religious beliefs. However, certain changes have occurred in the celebration of this festival due to the impact of globalization. The Bihu festival of Assam influences the *Bwisagu* festival's current form among the Bodos. Thus, it serves as a place for families dispersed due to livelihood reasons to reunite and enjoy the festivities with their fellow villagers. This festival not only facilitate social gatherings and idea exchanges but also promote unity, social cohesion, and progress. All differences are set aside when people share sweets and embrace one another during the celebration of this festival. Consequently, while the traditional *Bwisagu* festival has evolved in terms of rituals, dances, and observances in modern times, its significance in preserving its ethnic identity continues to grow.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to express sincere gratitude to all those respondents, community leaders and villagers for their cooperation and help for the successful completion of this research paper, which heavily relies on fieldwork. Above all, we incredibly express our thankfulness to the participants of this study, for their cooperation and willingness to share their experiences and insights enabled this research to complete successfully.

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