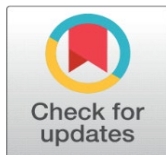
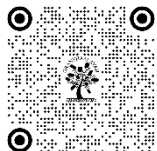


QUESTIONS OF KNOWLEDGE AND POWER: CONTESTATIONS WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE PERFORMANCE OF DOUDINIS OF THE BODOS OF ASSAM

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ABSTRACT

This research paper attempts to explore the notions of knowledge and power in the traditions of *doudini* (priestess) of the Bodo tribe of Assam, North-East India. The present paper tries to argue that although a *doudini* possesses traditional knowledge and supernatural power, she is deprived of the rights to equality and freedom. The *doudini* through her ritualistic dance performance plays the role of a mediator between the people and the Gods. The raw blood of the sacrificial animals is consumed by her in the *Kherai* festival, an important ritual of the *Bathou* religion. She is then charmed by the chants of the priest and falls into a trance and transforms into a spiritual being. The community addresses her as *nasoni* (dancer) and some as *doudini* (spirit), depending on the status attributed to her in the particular society. The *doudini* plays many parts which are presented in a series to the same audience. Though the ritual is performed both by female priest and male priest, their role differs as *doudini* has to accomplish more performances compared to male priest. The *doudini* does not have freedom to act on her own as she performs, based on the rules set by the system. The *doudini* does not enjoy freedom throughout the entire process of the ritual as she is bound to perform every act set by the system.

The present study has made a critical analysis on the role of *doudini*, discriminated on the ground of gender and questions her status based on the social system.

Keywords: Traditions of Doudini, Bodo Tribe, Dance Performance

1. INTRODUCTION

North-East India is a land with diverse ethnic cultures, people's language, religion, literature, costumes, customs, food habits, lifestyles, knowledge, and beliefs. Assam, one of the states of North-East India is itself a state with many ethnic groups and sub-groups with their diverse cultures. The different ethnic groups of Assam practice their own different rituals and ceremonies performed by priest or priestess. Usually, rituals and ceremonies are performed by a priest and one can rarely see a priestess performing a ritual. A *doudini* is a female shaman or a priestess

who plays the role of a mediator between the Gods and the people. The Bodos, one of the dominant plain tribes of Assam follows Bathou religion which celebrates Kherai festival, as an important part of the Bathou religion, organized by the villagers. In Kherai festival, the main role is played by a *doudini* who performs different dance forms and falls into a trance and receive the divinity. A *doudini* is not only a dancer but plays the most significant role of a priestess who is possessed by the spirits of Gods and tells the fortune of the village members, about their future and about their results of cultivation. The worshippers are also advised regarding their duties and responsibilities to save them from awaiting danger.

Boro (2001) writes that Kherai is one of the most significant annual festivals of the Bodos. The Kherai worship is observed for the welfare of both private and public life. During the Kherai festival many deities are worshipped by the people. Bathou brai is the God in chief among Bodo pantheon. Aileng, Agrong, Khoila, Karzi, Razkhandra, Cong Raja, Alai Khungri, Bhandri, Ranchandi, Bulli buri, Laokhar Gosai, Nowab Badcah are other Gods and Goddesses worshipped during the Kherai worship. These deities are offered pig, goat, fowl, flower, country beer (zau) etc. as sacrifices.

As the *doudini* plays the role of a mediator between the people and the Gods, the raw blood of the fowls sacrificed is consumed by her. She is then charmed by the incantations of the priest and falls into a trance and transforms into a woman of power as she is possessed by the deities. A *doudini* who is a woman, performs Kherai ritual and demonstrates through her dance performance. The community calls her as *nasoni* (dancer) and some as *doudini*, depending on the status attributed to her in the particular society. The *doudini*'s role is a social role which includes many parts which are then presented by the *doudini* on a series of occasions to the same audiences. She demonstrates various acts of the ritual through her dance. She is transferred to a spiritual realm who brings the blessing from the other dimension and interacts with the community. She is believed to be possessed by the deities and ascends to divinity. The process of the performance is significant as the dance form is created.

Weitz (2010) says that women are considered as weaker than men both physically and mentally and easily possessed by devil. This idea can be applied here as women are considered weaker, as self can be possessed by another spirit that controls their mind and spirit. Why is it always a woman who becomes the mediator between Gods and the people though same women are considered impure by the society? Is it because women are considered weaker than man and can be easily possessed by the spirits hence women are assigned the job of *doudini*? At the beginning the role was played by male members but it was much later the role was shifted to women. It was shifted most probably because men did not have time as they had to work in the fields or because as people says the ritual consist of several dance forms which is again stereotypically assigned to women as the feminine role is associated to women. Sometimes *doudinis* are tormented if they are not easily under control to become possessed. Some *doudinis* are left by their husbands because they perform those unclean acts of drinking raw blood Daimary (2019).

The present study has made a critical analysis on the role of *doudini*, discriminated on the ground of gender and questions her status. It attempts to analyze their performances in and outside ritual context. The *doudinis* are priestess only within the ritual arena but what about outside the ritual? It is very important to undertake a holistic research work in order to know the lives of the *doudinis* and their status in the society.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

A good number of research work is done on female shamans around the world which differs from one another. A couple of works on female shaman are reviewed here.

Kuwamura (2003) introduces two different kinds of procedures of the commencement for female shamans. The first one which is for a blind woman is possessed by a divine spirit in the ritual. The other progression is for a woman with normal eyesight who does not have to undergo a set ceremonial. On her way to becoming a shaman she experiences psychosomatic disturbances and states of spiritual exaltation due to being possessed by various spirits.

Karpati (2013) talks about two basic types of female shamans of Japan. They symbolize two different groups based on their social position and their musical activities. The medium type shamaness, the itako originates from a division of the rural society whose musical activities belong to folk art. The other type of shamaness, the miko is associated with the tasks of shrines.

Buyandelgeriyn (1999) questions about the politics of shamanic practices because the number of shamans among the Buriats of Dornod in Mongolia has been intensely growing since the mid-1980s, when the gradual closure of the socialist system and Soviet domination took place. It is discussed about how the shamans are made, and how the initiation takes place.

Berremen (1964) differentiated between the role of Brahmin priest in sanskritic ritual, and of shamans as a category of non-Brahmanical, non sanskritic practitioners, in Himalayas of North India, and Nepal. He says such practitioners or shamans are called baki because he has a connection to the spiritual world and an access that allows the deities to possess his body and interact with the people who calls them for information.

Filippi (2008) writes that in Tibet, the shamans are called Ku-Ten-S (Sku rten), a term which means 'bodily vehicle' and thus gives a very clear idea of the passivity of the individual who performs this function as an instrument of the deity; in Mongolian, the same concept is expressed by the term 'gurtum'. In Arunachal Pradesh, India it is called Ku ten.

Kshetrimayum (2009) talks about shamanism in Manipur and argues how the role of shamanism is establishing women's power and autonomy in both the Korean and Manipuri societies. In Manipur, maibis and maibas are the important functionaries of the old Meitei religion. The male maibas and female maibis are the traditional priest and priestess. Maibis are god-gifted (spirit possession) while maibas are made and trained through their labour and research. A woman may become a maibi at any age, young or old. Maibi is an intermediary between Lai (spirit) and human being.

3. AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main aim of the paper is to analyze the status of *doudinis* of the Bodos.

Objectives are:

- To identify the notion of knowledge and power of Doudini.
- To examine the role and position of Doudini in the society.
- To study Doudini's performances in and outside ritual context.

4. KNOWLEDGE AND POWER

Many philosophers have opined different views on knowledge and power. Sir Francis Bacon said that knowledge itself is power. Power enables one to achieve their intent. If knowledge helps to have power then it can be described as 'power'. According to Foucault, the term 'power/knowledge' is recognized through conventional forms of knowledge, scientific understanding, and 'truth'. Foucault discusses about the connection between power and knowledge, and how they are used as a system of social control through societal organizations. In contradictory to Bacon's idea, even if the *doudinis* have the knowledge of traditional practices they do not enjoy power rather they are subjects or under control of some system/institution which Foucault calls as 'Knowledge'. Here, the religion as an institution or knowledge has generated power which formed the notion of rituals, thereby authority/power or the notion of *doudini* formed but the system has delimited the liberty and freedom of the *doudini* who rather has become a subject who performs as tuned by the system. In the Bodo society the women folk are a store house of traditional knowledge. They have the knowledge of ethnic medicines. The *doudinis* have knowledge of ethnic medicine as well as they are believed to have supernatural power. People consult *doudinis* when they suffer from some illness and also as a seer. The *doudinis* play the main role in the Kherai ritual. She propitiates the Gods and Goddess through her dance. She emulates the nature of Gods and Goddesses through the eighteen different dance forms. In spite of being the sole person as the most powerful within the ritual arena but she becomes a mere subject under the control of the religious institution which is patriarchal in nature. The *doudini* has to remain silent throughout the entire ritual procedure which the male members of the society take advantage of it. The *doudini* has no freedom to control neither her silence nor her anger. Certain control mechanism is used in the entire process. The researchers witnessed in the field how at night when the *doudini* goes to sleep, the male members sit in the courtyard in the same house where *doudini* has to stay during the *Kherai* puja. While the *doudini* sleeps, the male members drink the traditional *zau* (rice beer) outside and mocks at the *doudini's* body parts (chest and bottom) using vulgar words. This is done only to impel the *doudini's* anger so that she can perform her acts in the next morning firmly as she has to be possessed by the spirits. Where is her power being the main priest of the ritual? She has no control over any acts during the entire process. She has to act accordingly set by the institution.

Dalimi Boro, a *doudini* said that she get that position at the cost of her hard toil. One informant (Bonsom Boro) said that the role of *doudini* is played by the women because men are busier in the work and also the various acts during the ritual needs a woman not a man because *doudini* has to perform various forms of dance so a woman well suits the role of *doudini* because of the feminine role that it demands as constructed by the society. Some other informants from the same place said that the role of *doudini* is lumbered on women because the process of the ritual is based on many dance forms which is again a construction of the society that women are predestined for dance. The body of a *doudini* is utilized for the benefit of the society. Although the *doudini* is a power herself she is treated as a mere object and even if she has knowledge she does not have the power within the system.

5. SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY AND POWER

Doudini's mind and body is discussed here in relation to women's societal and cultural context, wherein she acts as a repository of spiritual knowledge and authority is contested. In the process of her journey to become a *doudini*, she encounters psychosomatic disturbances and states of spiritual exaltation as she is possessed by numerous spirits. Being a *doudini*, she attains the spiritual power. By this authority, she becomes a storehouse of knowledge and power and the society gives her due respect. She is married into while not completely surrendering her role as a wife, she juggles with her spiritual world in the midst of her daily life.

The present study is about a *doudini*, a priestess who can also be called a professional shaman. All the ritual activities, such as the cult worship and chants, ritual performances and communicating with the spirit world falls under the control of an outstanding power (woman) who has been appointed as the most erudite among the household. Shaman scholars are also of the view that the preference of women to become possessed by spirit prevails since time immemorial, that belief in a "women's power" that is a women's spiritual power was wide spread, and that uncountable tales about women connecting with deities' roots back to several thousand years.

Yanagita Kunio's theory assumed that women are easily moved and easily possessed by spirits. Women also exhibit unfamiliar activities and a psychological ability to talk of mysteries. It is believed that women's universal physiological or emotional nature and character makes a shaman. This explains the character of woman in terms of "women's power".

The sagacious woman '*doudini*' with her longstanding ritual practice reserves her position and status in the society by abiding the ritual regulations every year.

Here culture is also political in a sense that it expresses the various relations of power. Though in a temporary phase, *doudini* re-assists her power as a repository of traditional knowledge of the Bodos. In terms of hierarchy, the Bordeuri (priest) and Bailung (the ritual sacrifice) assists the ritual priestess during the ritual. The *doudini's* knowledge in her temporal and social space, is the ritual (traditional) on the indigenous knowledge.

The society trusts her power and knowledge and give her due respect and support in the long process. The situations that confronts us here is the form of culture that aims our mind to the production of culture. The analogy of the performance involves the verbal and visual, words in the form of incantation and bodies, stasis (possesses ions) and movements, objects and space, scripts and improvisation, intention and compulsion.

6. ROLE OF DOUDINI

The *doudinis* enjoy a good position during the ritual, playing the role of a priestess. They are transformed to a spiritual being, who can mediate between the people and the Gods. But after the ritual they become the same normal human being without any spiritual power of divinity that she received during the ritual. Some *doudinis* are neglected by their families for being what they are. One of the main reasons of their being neglected is the act of drinking raw blood which is considered by some as something that a normal being cannot do or simply as "dirty". A *doudini* demonstrates around 18 number of dance forms. Before her performance she is decorated with her costume and jewelries before the audience. The *doudini* is made to change her ritual dress before the congregation. Though a *doudini* has the

knowledge and the 'power' but she has no liberty to exercise her power rather limited to the acts established by the system. The body of the *doudini* rather belongs to the community. A woman's body is subjugated in the name of *doudini* though she is in a high position for a while during the ritual. The entire Kherai ritual is organized in the fallow spaces of a Bodo village. The *doudini* is escorted to the ritual arena by the Deuri, Bailung and the villagers. The *doudini* takes bath in the river or the pond nearby, then is made to wear the traditional finery, before entering the Kherai Sali (arena). Her hair is parted and vermillion is put, making a big red mark (bindi) on her forehead. A pair of new dress is kept on the main Bathou alter. Once the *doudini* slowly gets into trance, she with the accompaniment of Kham, Siphung and Jotha slides the Dokhona (traditional dress) down her waist, in front of the public. The village women help her to change the ritual dress. There is a transformation these days, as the *doudini* in some places gets fully dressed up before entering the Kherai Sali.

Figure 1



Figure 1 Doudini Sitting on a Wooden Stool and Beside her a Woman Holding her Ritual Dress (Dhekidol Village, Sonitpur District, Assam, 2012).

The *doudini* narrates that she gets severe pain after the ritual as she has to dance and perform her acts on the edge of a sword.

A doudini, Dalimi Boro says "After the ritual when I return home the next day, I start having severe body pain as I have to perform various roles during the ritual, I have to dance on sharp edged sword and drink the raw blood of the sacrificed animals". (2017, from the field, Borbil, Sonitpur district)

Sometimes *doudinis* are incited to do certain acts if they are not easily under control to become possessed. The transformation of the *doudinis* into a spiritual being thereby playing the role between the people and the Gods is the main concern of the system as it directly affects the wellbeing of the people. So, *doudinis* have to fall into trance either in two ways. Either she is transformed naturally or if not, certain control mechanism is used to incite her to enter into the spiritual realm (Actually sometimes *douninis* are being beaten as an act to become possessed as we

witnessed in Darrang district of Assam). The *doudini* possesses the spiritual authority and is chosen as the most sagacious women among the village women. Amidst the mundane life she has to negotiate her religious authority. At times, she is disciplined and motivated by the public, as she is considered to be the repository of the traditional knowledge. It is she only who can bring peace and tranquility from the impending dangers. During the ritual when she faints, Jatrasi water (holy water) is sprinkled to regain her senses. Likewise, she is at times incited by the community to perform certain acts.

The role of a *doudini* and her life history is a very significant study and it is also important to know the significance of *doudini* for the people. Earlier, the Kherai festival was organized for three days but nowadays the number of days is declining and moreover in several areas of Bodo concentration it has been observed that animal sacrifices have been replaced by offering of flowers known as *bibar* Bathou. Slowly the practice of this tradition is in peril and the question of existence of *doudini* comes in. If *bibar* Bathou replaces *buli* Bathou (sacrifice) completely then the tradition of *doudini* is going to extinct. Culture is dynamic and it changes as the present culture testifies the changing nature of traditions and cultures due to assimilation and influences from other cultures.

The *doudini* is the agent who intercedes between the community and the Gods. In the Kherai festival, the *doudini* acts as medium offering songs of prayers to Goddess. The *doudini* is possessed by the deities and offers to protect the people. Then the *doudini* dances and acts as an oracle answering the questions put by the priest. Thus, being the mediator between God and the people the *doudini* enjoys a good position. But this position is obtained at the cost of severe pain and inequality on the ground of sex. Though the ritual is accomplished both by the male priest and the priestess, the division of role is not equal. The priestess' role cannot be compared with the role of the male priests as she has to perform all the acts alone. The group comprises of a male priest, a small number of male musicians and the priestess (female shaman). Among other members the role of a *doudini* is more compared to other performers of the ritual. The *doudini* has to perform 18 different kinds of dance forms, sacrifice fowls, drink the raw blood of the sacrificial animals, falls into trance and acts as an oracle whereas the male musicians only play the rhythm whenever required and the male priest questions the *doudini* (deity) about the problems befallen to the society. The raw blood of the sacrificial animals is consumed by the *doudini* which creates a dire consequence outside the ritual realm as some of them are neglected by the family for the aforesaid act.

Women are considered weaker, as their self can be possessed by another spirit that controls their mind and spirit. It is also a reality in the patriarchal system as men is the head and women subjugated. By and large it is a female shaman who plays the role of a mediator but there is a particular place at Sonitpur district in Assam where the role of a *doudini* is played by a male priest but to a limited role. This particular male priest neither performs the 18 different dance forms nor does he fall into a trance. Moreover, he does not even offer sacrifice, he does not drink raw blood and take the responsibility to assure protection to the people. He just offers prayer and releases the offerings (pigeons) in the air. So, this bears an ample testimony that woman as a priest has to bear more burdens compared to a male priest. The *doudini* does not enjoy equality and liberty as she is bound to the system which is patriarchal in nature.

7. DOUDINI'S PERFORMANCE IN AND OUTSIDE RITUAL CONTEXT

During the Kherai ritual, the *doudini* dances and acts as an oracle answering the questions put by the priest:

Doudini: Oh, sons and daughters, oh!

Priest: Why is this pestilence?

Doudini: Oh, sons and daughters, you have forgotten the Lord, our creator. You must believe in God. And obey us and shun injustices, impiety, and dirt. At the time of planting and harvesting, you must worship us. Worship God your creator, and envy none of his creation [Brahma \(1960\)](#).

By playing the role of a *doudini* she receives respect and honour during the ritual ceremony though has no control over her acts.

But what is her status or social position outside the ritual space is an important part of the study. The transformation of role impacts the life of the *doudini* as she receives different attitude from the society. *Doudini's* performance in the ritual context is controlled and acts on the basis of the rules set by the system and performs on the sacred space. As she is on the sacred space she also has to maintain silence as she cannot speak till the entire process completes. The *doudini* even cannot consume cooked food till the ritual is over as it is considered that the cooked food could be defiled by the touch. Lots of preparation has to be made before the ritual right from maintaining physical hygiene to spiritual enhancement. The *doudini* transforms into a deity during the ritual and mediates between the people and the gods for which she is rewarded a good position as people believes her to be a different spirit. In fact, it is the spirit who is respected in the body of the *doudini* not the *doudini* as a person. It last only within the ritual space and time.

When the ritual is over, the *doudini* returns to her old self, a simple woman who has husband and children and engaged in different activities and occupation. Outside the ritual context she does not enjoy the same status as she did within the ritual arena. Some *doudinis* are even considered unclean after the ritual because they consume the raw blood of the sacrificed animals. Some people still have faith on the *doudinis* that they can solve various problems related to health, marriage, childlessness and other problems and consult them. Some *doudinis* practice the age-old ethnic medicines which also becomes an economic resource to them after the *Kherai* festival. But the *doudini* post ritual ceremony is no more considered as a power/deity/spirit as the spirit leaves her body right after ceremony and the body of the *doudini* is a body of a normal being. The act of drinking raw blood during the ritual which is glorified as divine act is degraded outside the ritual context to be unclean. Thus, the dignity of the *doudini* is lessened after the ritual to a mere being without any supernatural power and can resume to her normal diet and activities as her body is no longer a divinity. Some Bodo villagers even connoted the act of the ritual to be the acts of the 'Asuras' (demons) and also said that the whole community is signified as the descendant of 'Asuras' (demons) and suggested that the ritual should no longer be observed.

8. CONCLUSION

A *doudini* attains a high position during the ritual ceremony at the cost of severe pain that she undergoes during her performances. The *doudinis* testify their experiences to be painful post ritual. She is even denied of freedom of any acts in

fact, each and every performance is structured by the system. Though she is considered as 'power' or symbolizes it, but actually she does not enjoy its liberty and freedom. It is observed that the role of the *doudini* (female priest) is burdened with more acts as based on the field cases that has been discussed above. The role of *doudini* is rather a serious matter that includes multiple sacrifices and drinking of raw blood, different dance forms, falling into trance etc. which are not performed by a male priest who plays the role of a *doudini* in the same ritual in different places. It can be concluded that she is a spiritual authority without power.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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