

# Plants in Bodo Folklore and Ritual Practices: An Ethnobotanical Perspective

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## Abstract

The Bodo community of Northeast India possesses a rich repository of ethnobotanical knowledge, which is deeply embedded within folklore, rituals, and traditional healing practices. This paper explores the symbolic representation of plants, some of their therapeutic applications, and ecological significance, drawing on oral traditions and indigenous healthcare systems. Documenting such knowledge not only preserves an integral aspect of Bodo cultural identity but also highlights the relevance of traditional medicine in contemporary health and biodiversity conservation efforts. By bridging ethnobotany with cultural anthropology, this work underscores the need for safeguarding both plant biodiversity and the intangible heritage it sustains.

**Keywords:** Bodo Folklore, Ritual Practices, Ethnobotany

## 1. Introduction

As one of the ancient indigenous groups of Northeast India, the Bodos are the largest ethnic group native to Assam. They are an ethno-linguistic group primarily inhabiting the Bodoland Territorial Region of Assam, an autonomous region comprising five districts: Kokrajhar, Baksa, Chirang, Udalguri, and Tamulpur. The Bodo language belongs to the Tibeto-Burman branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family (Wary, 2002, p.1). The Bodo culture reflects a close association of nature and seasonal cycles, characterized by vibrant oral narratives, rituals, and a wealth of indigenous knowledge. Therefore, their ethnobotanical knowledge is a unique reservoir of indigenous wisdom passed down through generations, often in the form of songs, stories, festivals, and ceremonial customs.

Ethnobotany studies the way of utilization, perception, and management of plant species by indigenous communities based on their cultural beliefs. Among the Bodos, plants have deep symbolic associations and are functional, holding roles in birth ceremonies, seasonal festivals such as Bwisagu and Domasi, healing rituals, marriages, and funerary customs. The cultural identity of Bodos is intertwined with nature through sacred groves and wild edible plants. Additionally, Bodo ethnobotany is dynamic-it is seasonally adapted, contextually rich, and ecologically sustainable. The ritual use of certain leaves or resins during purification, protection, or fertility rites demonstrates how symbolic beliefs often sync with empirical plant properties, such as the antiseptic qualities of tulsi or the aromatic cleansing nature of dhuna resin.

However, this deeply rooted knowledge system remains underdocumented and underrecognized in today's advancing scientific era, despite its potential contributions to biodiversity conservation, healthcare, and cultural preservation. It faces the risk of cultural amnesia due to modernization, a decline in interest among young people, and environmental degradation.

## 2. Methodology

This review is based on a qualitative synthesis of primary and secondary data collection from the Bodo community, particularly those residing in the Kokrajhar district of Assam. The primary focus was on literature that describes traditional plant use in folklore, rituals, and socio-religious ceremonies. Although this study is primarily literature-based, it adheres to principles of ethnobotanical research, being culturally sensitive and respectful in its depiction of indigenous practices.

## 3. Plants Used in Ritual Practices

The plants are not only seen as vital for survival but also serve as cultural signifiers, deities and vehicles of ancestral memory. The rituals of the Bodo culture mark the key stages of one's life cycle, from birth to death. These rituals are particularly chosen not only for their availability, but for the spiritual, medicinal, and cultural meanings they hold. This symbolic relationship has inherently promoted the conservation of several native plant species over generations.

**Table 1: Key Plants in Bodo Folklore and Ritual Practices**

Local Name	Common Name	Scientific name	Use in folklore/ ritual	Symbolism
Sijou	Indian Spurge Tree	<i>Euphorbia splendens</i>	Central to Bathou religion, worshipped in home altars and community shrines	Guardian deity, spiritual purity
Tulonsi	Tulsi	<i>Ocimum sanctum</i>	Planted in northeast-side courtyards; used in purification rituals and prayers	Purity, protection, medicinal power
Owa	Bamboo	<i>Bambusa tulda</i>	Featured in folktales; used in construction, rituals, and as musical instruments in Bodo culture	Strength, flexibility, protection
Thalir	Banana	<i>Musa paradisiaca</i>	Used in birth, marriage, and death ceremonies; leaves used for serving sacred food; also worshipped	Fertility, life-cycle transitions
Agru	Agarwood	<i>Aquilaria malaccensis</i>	Source of fragrant resin; appears in wealth-related folktales	Spiritual wealth, blessings
Dhuna	Dhuna	<i>Canarium strictum</i>	Resin burned as incense during ceremonies	Spiritual cleansing, ancestor calling
Emao	—	(various local species)	Used in fermentation of rice beer ( <i>jou</i> ), especially during festivals and ceremonies	Hospitality, celebration, tradition
Jathrashi	Willow-leaved Justicia	<i>Justicia nadarussa</i>	Planted along with Sijuo plant, help in purifying the shrine area	Purification, worshipping
Gambari	White teak	<i>Gmelina arborea</i>	Used in sacred ceremonies like wedding, worshipping	Sacred furniture, in medicine
Dubri ha-gra	Bermuda grass	<i>Cynodon dactylon</i>	In holy rituals along with tulsi to sprinkle to water	Sacred plant

Phakhri	Banyan tree	<i>Ficus benghalensis</i>	Used in rituals of worship and death rituals	Sacred plant
Phathwi	Betel leaf	<i>Piper betle</i>	Offered with areca nut during welcoming and auspicious occasions	Respect, social bonding
Goi	Areca nut	<i>Areca catechu</i>	Paired with betel; part of sacred offerings and social exchange	Hospitality, fertility

**Table 2: Key plants in Bodo folk medicine**

Local name	Common name	Scientific name	Medicinal use
Mani muni	Indian pennywort	<i>Centella asiatica</i>	Liver problems, digestion, skin ailments
Usumwi/Jari	Toothache plant	<i>Spilanthes peniculata</i>	Mouth ulcer treatment, common cold, and cough
Maisundri	Chinese lizard tail	<i>Houttuynia cordata</i>	Headache, jaundice, pneumonia
Singrim-wikhi	Creeping woodsorrel	<i>Oxalis Corniculata</i>	Digestive problems, also has anti-oxidant and anti-inflammatory properties
Sam laothi	Asthma plant	<i>Euphorbia hirta</i>	Breathing disorders, dengue fever, and severe diarrhea
Gongar Dundiya	Long Coriander	<i>Eryngium foetidum</i>	Digestive problems, inflammation, infections
Neem	Neem	<i>Azadirachta indica</i>	Antifungal, digestive problems, skin diseases

## 4.1. Worshiping Rituals

Bathousim is the folk religion of the Bodos. Here, the Sijuo plant is worshipped as the Supreme God- the “Bathou Bwrai” and has five ridges, which emphasize Ha (earth), Dwi (water), Baar (wind), Or (fire), and Okhrang (sky) (Narzary, 2025). The Sijuo plant is planted within fenced altars made of bamboo at the northeast side of the courtyards in houses. Within the fenced altars, there is another sacred plant, ‘Jathrashi’ (*Justicia genadarussa*), symbolically believed to cleanse and sanctify the space; however, its presence may also act as a natural deterrent to animals such as dogs from urinating nearby.

## 4.2. Birth and Childhood Rituals

The banana leaf is considered auspicious among the Bodo community. In the birth ceremonies, such as the naming ceremony, banana leaves are often used as a ritual surface for several offerings, to place sacred items, and also food items (Narzi, 1966/2009, p.24). In certain traditional settings, a banana stem is placed near the entrance of the home or ritual side to ward off malevolent spiritual influences and bless the newborn with a healthy and long life. Leaves from Tulsi (*Ocimum sanctum*) and Neem (*Azadirachta indica*) are commonly placed near the sleeping infant to ward off negative supernatural influences and insects. Herbal baths made from local medicinal plants are also part of postpartum rituals to ensure purification and recovery. Dhuna (resin from *Canarium strictum*) is burned as incense to purify the home and repel negative energies during this delicate stage.

#### 4.2.1. Navel cutting ceremony (Uthumai Hanai)

It involves cutting of umbilical cord after childbirth using the sharp edge of a bamboo blade, and it is then tied with a silk or cotton thread (Narzi, 1966/2009, p.114). Additionally, the sex of the newborn baby is determined by the number of times the thread is spun around the umbilical cord: five times for male and six times for female. The purification ceremony known as ‘Gothosa Phwtharnai’ involves the use of nine Dubri hagra (*Cynodon dactylon*), a branch of Tulsi, and a gold ring (Mushahary, 2024).

#### 4.3. Marriage Ceremonies

Weddings in Bodo society are colourful and sacred affairs that incorporate several plants with symbolic meanings of fertility and prosperity. Banana plants are tied at the wedding entrance and around the wedding pavilion (Habani mandap) to symbolize continuity, growth, and blessings for progeny. Betel leaves and Areca nuts are offered on plates of laijwolai (banana leaves) along with jewari (earthen lamp) to mark the beginning of the wedding ceremony in front of the entrance gate and also the house gate. Also, betel leaves, areca nuts, and lime are offered to guests as a form of gratification. Gambhari Khamplai is a wooden stool from the Gambhari tree (*Gmelia arborea*) with no nails at the corners, symbolizing purity and natural unity. Also, common flowers like Marigold (*Tagetes spp.*) and Roses (*Rosa spp.*) are used for decoration and in garland preparation.

#### 4.4. Death and Mourning Rituals

Death rituals among the Bodos consist of practices that focus on preparing the deceased, followed by cremation and fest ceremonies to pay respect to the deceased soul’s journey to the afterlife and also rebirth. During the preparation of the deceased, a few drops of water are offered using a banyan leaf (*Ficus benghalensis*) in the belief that the lips of the departed become serene. Banana leaves are again significant, used to wrap ritual items or food offerings made for the departed soul. Another significant symbolism is the planting of a banana plant in the site of the cremation ground for the unmarried deceased individual, reflecting a belief in rebirth and the hope for fulfilment (marriage) in their next life. Dhuna is burnt in an earthen pot throughout the ritual to purify the space and symbolically sever the connection between the departed soul with their family and relatives. A branch of tulsi leaves is used to sprinkle holy water around the residence of the deceased, serving as a ritual act of purification. The use of plants in these rituals reinforces the belief that death is a transformation rather than an end, and that the natural world plays an active role in this transition.

#### 4.5. Festivals and Seasonal Rituals

During the celebration of the Bodo new year; Bwisagu, a branch of Mwkhwana (*Clerodendrum infortunatum*), a flower of Khathri (*Curcuma caesia*), collective leaves and twigs of Raidwng plant (*Saccharum sp.*), Diglilithi (a stick from plant), and vegetables like Lao (*Lagenaria siceraria*), Panthao (*Solanum melongena*), Haldwi (*Curcuma longa*), and Haijeng (*Zingiber officinale*) are sliced into circular shapes, then strung all together with a thread and tied to different upper corners around the house.

Kherai puja, is one of the most significant religious festivals of the Bodos, prominently incorporating a variety of plants as required ritual elements, a Sijuo plant, a tulsi plant, three pieces of Owa Hathai (*Bambusa pallida Munro*), and rows of eighteen pairs of Khangkhla plants are planted from the middle to the northern end (a kind of sacred plant) (Hazarika, 2022, pp.191-192). The planting of the Khangkhla plant symbolises the societal roles and expectations traditionally assigned to men and women within the community. This festival forms the core ritual of the Bathwo religion of the Bodos.

## 5. Ecological conservation with Folklore plants

There is an informal conservation ethic that lies within these rituals; for example, bamboo groves are selectively cut and not overexploited during non-ritual seasons, while agarwood trees are generally protected due to their rarity and high economic value. These cultural practices have served as community-based conservation methods, conserving plant diversity using taboos, rituals, and seasonal prohibitions. In contrast to formal biodiversity policy, these traditional systems use cultural enforcement and intergenerational value transmission. However, this ecological balance is increasingly threatened by the loss of traditional knowledge, deforestation, and the commercialization of sacred plants like agarwood. Moreover, increased urban youth migration causes erosion of traditional knowledge and ritual practices. An understanding of plant cultural symbolism as a means of biodiversity conservation can open the door to a more holistic and inclusive approach towards environmental sustainability in the region.

## 6. Conclusion

Plants in Bodo folklore and ritual practices are not merely utilitarian resources but serve as living embodiments of spiritual beliefs, social values, and ecological wisdom. Sacred species used in Kherai Puja and Bwisagu celebrations, along with medicinal herbs in folk healing, affirm the close relationship between people and their environment. Preservation of Bodo ethnobotanical heritage requires an integrated approach involving cultural documentation, community-based conservation, and incorporation of traditional plant knowledge into sustainable development strategies. Recognizing these practices not only enriches our understanding of indigenous knowledge systems but also provides valuable insights for biodiversity conservation, ecological restoration, and culturally sensitive health care. In essence, safeguarding the ethnobotany of the Bodo people is more than an act of cultural preservation; it is a commitment to sustaining a living knowledge system that harmonizes nature, tradition, and community well-being.

## References

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