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An Ethnographic Study Of Bwisagu Songs: A Folkloristic Analysis In The Context Of The Bodo Community

-Purnima Boro, Ph.D.

Assistant professor, Department of English
KBR Degree College, Udalguri, BTR, Assam

Abstract: This study presents a folkloristic analysis of *Bwisagu* songs, a vital component of Bodo folk literature. *Bwisagu*, the most significant seasonal festival of the Bodo people, is characterized by vibrant cultural expressions, including dance, music, and various ritualistic practices such as cattle rites and ancestor worship. Employing a descriptive methodology, this paper examines the cultural significance, thematic dimensions, and artistic nuances of *Bwisagu* songs, emphasizing their function in preserving and transmitting the oral traditions of the Bodo community. Through this analysis, the study underscores the role of *Bwisagu* songs as both a medium of cultural continuity and a reflection of the socio-religious ethos of the Bodo people.

Keywords: Ethnography, Folkloristic, *Bwisagu*, Bodo culture, oral tradition, festival songs

Introduction

Bwisagu is one of the most prominent seasonal festivals of the Bodo people, celebrated over a span of seven days with various rituals, including cattle worship, homage to ancestors, household purification, feasting, and the exchange of goodwill. It marks the beginning of the Bodo New Year and is a time of joy and communal bonding.

Reverend Sidney Endle (1911) observed that the *Bwisagu* festival lasts for seven days, during which the Bodo people engage in festivities, dancing, and feasting, with little to no work being done. The entire community participates in merrymaking, particularly the younger generation, who immerse themselves in singing and dancing.

The term "*Bwisagu*" is derived from the Bodo words *Bwisw* (year) and *Agu* (beginning), meaning the "beginning of the year" (Narzary, 1999). Another interpretation, suggested by Dhuparam Basumatary, links it to the term "*Bihu*," which is believed to originate from the Bodo words *Bi* (to beg) and *Hu* (to give), indicating an act of giving and receiving.

The *Bwisagu* festival is characterized by a diverse range of folk songs, reflecting the cultural ethos, social values, and emotional expressions of the Bodo people. These songs, passed down through generations, play a crucial role in preserving Bodo heritage and traditions.

Types of *Bwisagu* Songs

Bwisagu songs can be classified into various categories based on their thematic content and purpose within the festival.

1. Songs Associated with Cattle Worship in *Bwisagu* Songs

Bwisagu, as a festival deeply rooted in agrarian traditions, commences with the observance of cattle worship rites, underscoring the vital role of livestock in Bodo society. On the first day, cattle—especially cows—are ritually bathed, their horns and hooves are anointed with oil, and they are adorned with garlands made from symbolic agricultural produce such as gourd, brinjal, and turmeric. These ritualistic practices reflect the Bodo people's reverence for cattle as essential companions in agriculture, ensuring their health, fertility, and productivity in the coming year.

As part of the ceremonial proceedings, a traditional rhyme is recited, bestowing blessings upon the cattle and expressing hopes for their strength and prosperity:

Lao za phanthaoza
Bwswr bwswr er hanza hanza
Bimani khither phiphani khither
Nwngswr zagwn halua gidir

(Eat gourd, eat brinjal,
 Grow year after year,
 May you become a strong bull,
 Do not remain small like your mother,
 Be as grand as your father.)

This verse encapsulates the symbolic aspirations of cattle owners, wishing for the physical strength and longevity of their livestock, which are indispensable for agricultural labor. The act of feeding cattle auspicious foods further reinforces the reciprocal relationship between humans and animals in the agrarian ecosystem.

Another significant song, sung while gently striking the cattle with twigs from the *Dighilithi* plant, emphasizes their health, vitality, and increased productivity:

Digilithi mswuni muli
Digilithi laothi khri khri ganthi
Zwngni mswua zagwn bolod zathi.

(The whip of the *Dighilithi* plant
 Is a great medicine for cows,
 Its strokes make them yield more milk,
 Every calf will grow into a mighty bull.)

This song highlights the belief in traditional cattle-rearing practices, where the use of medicinal plants is thought to strengthen livestock and enhance milk production. The gentle striking with *Dighilithi* twigs is not meant as punishment but rather as a ritualistic gesture symbolizing purification and good health.

Through such songs, *Bwisagu* reaffirms the deep interconnection between agricultural prosperity and cultural tradition, portraying cattle not only as economic assets but also as sacred beings that sustain the agrarian way of life. These musical expressions serve as oral testaments to indigenous knowledge systems,

ensuring that values of care, sustenance, and gratitude toward nature continue to be passed down through generations.

2. Songs of Worship and Ancestral Tribute in *Bwisagu* Songs

The second day of *Bwisagu* is dedicated to religious observances and ancestral generation, reflecting the deep spiritual and cultural ethos of the Bodo community. On this day, Bodo families perform rituals in honor of **Bathow Bwrai**, a deity identified with Lord Shiva, seeking divine blessings for prosperity and well-being. A significant aspect of this observance is the offering of food and drinks to ancestral spirits, symbolizing reverence, continuity, and the enduring presence of forebears within the community.

As part of these ancestral tributes, special dishes—such as fowl meat prepared with bitter herbs—are meticulously prepared and offered to both the living and the spirits of the deceased. The inclusion of traditional cuisine in these rituals signifies a sacred bond between past and present generations, reinforcing cultural heritage through culinary practices.

Bwisagu songs performed during these ceremonies serve as expressions of gratitude, devotion, and filial piety, articulating the community's collective respect for their ancestors. These songs not only strengthen familial and communal ties but also function as oral repositories of indigenous religious beliefs. Through poetic and melodic invocations, they perpetuate the values of reverence, harmony, and spiritual continuity, ensuring that ancestral traditions remain an integral part of Bodo cultural identity.

3. Songs of Dance and Celebration in *Bwisagu* Songs

From the third day onward, *Bwisagu* festivities are characterized by vibrant performances of music and dance, which serve as an essential expression of cultural identity and communal joy. Traditional musical instruments play a crucial role in these celebrations, with men skillfully playing the **Kham** (a traditional drum), **Siphung** (a bamboo flute), **Serja** (a four-stringed instrument), and **Thorkha** (a bamboo clapper). Women, on the other hand, contribute to the musical ensemble by playing the **Gongona** (a traditional harp) and **Jotha** (cymbals), creating a harmonious blend of rhythm and melody that accompanies the energetic dance performances.

During this period, young boys and girls actively participate in the festivities by visiting households, where they perform songs and dances in exchange for blessings and gifts from elders. This practice not only fosters intergenerational bonding but also reinforces the communal values embedded in Bodo traditions. The celebratory atmosphere of *Bwisagu* is encapsulated in a widely sung folk song that reflects the exuberance of the season:

*Bwisagu bwthwrni okha hanaizwng
Bomphang bilayabw khrob-khrob akhai khobw,
Zwngni gwswabw bagurum bagurum mwsanw*

(With the showers of *Bwisagu*,
The tree leaves clap in delight,
We too wish to dance joyfully.)

This lyrical expression beautifully captures the essence of *Bwisagu*, metaphorically linking nature's renewal with human emotions. The imagery of tree leaves "clapping" in response to the seasonal rains mirrors the collective enthusiasm of the people as they immerse themselves in dance and music. Such songs not only convey the celebratory mood of the festival but also reinforce the deep connection between nature and Bodo cultural expressions. Through these artistic performances, *Bwisagu* becomes more than a festival—it transforms into a dynamic space for cultural preservation, social interaction, and the reaffirmation of communal harmony.

4. Songs Related to Weaving and Artistic Expression in *Bwisagu* Songs

Weaving occupies a central role in Bodo society, with women traditionally engaged in crafting their own garments as both a cultural practice and a symbol of artistic expression. This skill, passed down through generations, is not merely a means of clothing production but also a reflection of creativity, identity, and social values. The significance of weaving in Bodo life is eloquently captured in *Bwisagu* songs, which celebrate craftsmanship while intertwining themes of labor, aesthetics, and personal emotions.

An example of such lyrical representation is found in the following verse:

Thang-khalthnag sal gabnai Habab ada
Nwngkhwu gwsu khangnanwi
Agor ernayasw khana nangbai.

(The loom makes the sound "thang-khalthang,"
 Oh, dear brother, remembering you,
 My design has lost its shape.)

This song not only depicts the rhythmic and meditative nature of weaving but also conveys an emotional depth, where the act of creating intricate patterns is disrupted by longing and nostalgia. The reference to the sound of the loom highlights the intimate relationship between the weaver and her craft, while the mention of a loved one underscores how emotions are interwoven with artistic expression. Such songs serve as more than mere descriptions of daily life; they provide insight into the lived experiences of Bodo women, portraying weaving as both a technical skill and a deeply personal, creative endeavor. Through these compositions, *Bwisagu* songs preserve the cultural heritage of textile artistry while reinforcing the social and emotional dimensions embedded in traditional craftsmanship.

5. Agricultural Work in *Bwisagu* Songs

Agriculture serves as the principal livelihood of the Bodo people, and work songs constitute a significant component of their oral folk tradition. These songs, traditionally sung during agricultural activities such as ploughing and harvesting, not only provide rhythmic coordination for laborious tasks but also serve as an emotional and cultural outlet for farmers. Through lyrical expressions, they articulate the hardships, aspirations, and joys associated with agrarian life, reflecting the deep connection between the Bodo community and their land.

A poignant example of such agricultural-themed songs is as follows:

Asar danao phwiyw, Okhani dwi bana
Ayo onjali, Baikhhuni bwthorao, Nulainai jayw jwgnha.

(In the month of Asar,
 The floods arrive,
 Oh, my beloved,
 In the rainy season,
 We shall meet again.)

This verse captures the cyclical nature of agricultural life, where the arrival of the monsoon brings both challenges and renewal. The reference to seasonal change underscores the dependence of the Bodo people on natural rhythms for their sustenance. Simultaneously, the mention of a beloved adds an emotional dimension, suggesting that agricultural labor is not merely a physical endeavor but also interwoven with personal and communal experiences. These songs, therefore, function as a repository of indigenous

agricultural knowledge while also serving as a medium for emotional expression, reinforcing the collective identity and resilience of the Bodo farming community.

6. Humorous and Joking in *Bwisagu* Songs

Bwisagu songs frequently incorporate elements of humor and lighthearted teasing, particularly in the playful exchanges between young men and women. These songs serve as an important social mechanism, facilitating interaction, fostering camaraderie, and often acting as a subtle form of courtship within the community. Through witty dialogues and satirical remarks, they reflect the dynamic social relationships and traditional gender roles embedded in Bodo society.

An example of such humorous exchanges can be observed in the following verses:

Boys:

Wua barini wua mewa

Okhanaiblanw nwnswr awa phawa

(Bamboo shoots, bamboo plants,
You girls are idle every day.)

Girls:

Habab adamwna halaubw thanga

Mwiaubw zaya

Nwi nwnswrkhwu naiphingwna

Nwinwnswrkhwu phisai lagwna

(Oh brother,
You do not know how to plough,
We do not care for you,
We will not marry you.)

This playful repartee exemplifies the lighthearted rivalry between young men and women, where the boys humorously accuse the girls of idleness, while the girls retort by questioning the boys' agricultural skills, implying that they are unworthy suitors. Such exchanges not only serve as a form of entertainment but also function as an informal space for socialization, reinforcing communal bonds and cultural values. The humor embedded in these songs reflects the broader social dynamics of the Bodo community, where wit, laughter, and poetic expression play a crucial role in everyday interactions.

7. Expressions of Love and Romance in *Bwisagu* Songs

The theme of love and romance occupies a prominent place in *Bwisagu* songs, reflecting the deep emotional experiences of attraction, longing, and separation within the Bodo cultural milieu. These songs serve as a medium through which individuals express their affections, desires, and emotional struggles, often portraying the complexities of courtship and relationships within the community.

For instance, the following excerpt from a traditional *Bwisagu* song encapsulates the sentiments of love and the societal expectations surrounding marriage:

Habab ada gwsjwng gsw. jadwngbwla

Mwnjwng mwn jaswngbwla

Ai aphanau anghwu swngphwi

(If you love me,
If you wish to marry me,
Come and speak with my parents.)

Conclusion:

Bwisagu songs constitute a fundamental aspect of Bodo folklore, embodying the community's rich cultural traditions, emotional expressions, and social customs. As an integral part of the oral tradition, these songs have been transmitted across generations, serving as a vital mechanism for preserving and perpetuating the ethnic and cultural identity of the Bodo people. However, in the face of rapid modernization and evolving socio-cultural dynamics, the need for systematic documentation and preservation of these folk songs has become increasingly urgent to prevent their gradual erosion. Beyond their role in entertainment, *Bwisagu* songs function as powerful expressions of communal life, imparting cultural knowledge, reinforcing collective identity, and providing a platform for social critique and reflection. Their performative and didactic dimensions underscore their significance not only as artistic expressions but also as valuable repositories of indigenous knowledge and historical consciousness.

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