



FOOD CULTURE: A SPACE FOR CREATIVITY, PROTEST AND NEGOTIATION

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Abstract

This paper will focus on the use of food to signify ritual purity or exclusiveness and separateness in the Boro community rituals. This study examines the process of transition of a traditional performance namely, Kherai of the Bodos of Assam. It explains how an ethnic group engages itself in conserving, through creation and recreation, a traditional performance that faces the threat of extinction. In the process, the study also looks into the processes and strategies deployed by the community members towards making of a performance through ritual sacrifices, ritual dances, ritual food and feast etc. The unique, incorporative nature of eating (assimilating) and offering to god makes food an important social symbol. Relationships between a group and its gods, as well as between members of the community, are manifested in events of food sharing and exchange. This cooking of food also represents their human ability to transform nature. There is transformation by nature also. The uncooked food is transformation by nature. Within the domain of the cooked, two common processes, roasting and boiling are discussed.

Key words: Sacrificial Food, Kherai, food habit, Jumai

The need to eat (essential for human biological survival) provides many opportunities for communication and creativity. Eating events are fraught with rules of precedence and deference as well as etiquette. The individual groups communicate their civility and separate themselves from other class groups. Food becomes a gift or an offering or becomes sacred entity through association with the supernatural. The theme culture focuses on the fact that humans create culture as a way of making sense of their social and physical worlds. This also focuses on the relationship of individuals to other that inhabit their social world. At the same time it also helps individuals consider how their identity was formed and how it influences their attitude and beliefs.

The term food habits or food culture or food ways to describe the manner in which humans use food, including everything from how it is chosen, acquired and distributed to who prepares, serves and eats it. The significance of the food habits process is that it is unique to human beings. It is interesting

to know why people spend so much time, energy, money and creativity on eating (Kitter, Sucher and Nelms 2012).

The paper also looks at food as objects and as practices that contribute to community's identity. These questions reinforce the concept of food as cultural signifier and encompass fields as literature, anthropology, sociology and history. Also the relationship between the food people eat and others who perceive it is important. It is also found that group approval or disapproval of a given food has an impact on food choices.

Though various kinds of Kherai are celebrated throughout the year in Kokrajhar district, the Darrang district is unaware of any such kinds of Kherai. But in the Darrang district there is celebration all throughout the year and the festival culminates in Bathou Kherai which is celebrated on the first Wednesday of the Phalguna month. The festival starts with **Jumai Gathar** at Bordeori's house. The elderly folk assemble at the house of the Bordeori. The essentials and the important things are collected in the house. There is lot of enthusiasm amongst the community. Food and food habits also contribute to the development and transmission of culture. As culture is defined as beliefs, values and attitudes practised and accepted by members of group or community. It seems learnt more than inherited. Various responsibilities are shared by the people.

Food as an expression of identity is apparent in the experience of using it as ritual objects. The food symbolism permeates our social psyche. Food has symbolic meaning based on association with other meaningful experiences. Food references can be found in many of our common expressions. Five pots of rice beer (jau) are prepared and kept in Bordeuri's (head priest) house. It is significant that jau in Boro culture carries an important position and meaning in their religious and social lives. By the way of offering jau to gods and guests different meanings can be attributed through it. Jau becomes a matter of purity and sanctity when offered to gods, a matter of pleasure and etiquette when offered to guests. There is hierarchy of number of pots to be offered to specific positions and personalities. Four of the pots amongst the five are placed at the kherai altar. Two of the pots are offered to Buragarang (spirit) and two to the Ranpagli (female deity). The left one is for Gangar bura at the Bordeuri's house. It is not brought to the kherai altar. Jau becomes a medium of cock is sacrificed by the two Bordeoris and Bailung as Prayaschit. The sacrificed cock is later cooked and is shared as bhog. Daudini offers bettlenut as a mutual sharing with the official priests and the people who are in the charge of Kherai. They initiate their fast together and after finishing all the rituals and ceremonies of kherai end up their fast too.

Sacrificial Food

Ritual objects are mostly embedded in social and ideological systems. The Kherai Sali (ritual arena) where the ritual items like laizams (offerings on leaf), betel nut and leaf, powdered rice and fowls, pigs, goats including flora and fauna and are kept in a suitable space for comporting ritual behaviour. All the ritual objects in manner of food items are consecrated by the priestess at the beginning of the ritual. The ritual officials who are the intermediaries between people and the spirit ensure that material offerings along with the prayers reach the protector spirits. The jatras (tulsi) and the

sacrificial blood consumed by the priestess . A sense of connectivity is formed with the imaginative and the real worlds as soon as the blood is consumed by the daudini. The jatras leaves soaked in water bring her back to life. The physical assemblage of the ritual items does not mean that they are ready for use , for they must be consecrated by the priests first . The relation between the priestess and sacrificial objects remains unchanged for ever. Exclusiveness of the ritual domains keeps resources and relationships focussed internally and that assures that none other than the priestess can interact with the ritual objects .The cosmological authentication of the ritual objects can be asserted as production of cultural and social identity priests traditional and religious authority. The sacrificed items in the end are distributed equally and cooked as prasad by the community .They consume it after that . This portrays a complex and active engagement of material culture within a ritual in the Boro society.

Sacred Food

The holy offering that is offered to Bathou is raw in nature. Mainly rice flour, sacrificial animals (pig, hen and goat), entrails of the birds, jatras, pati-dei, jau, betel -leaf and areca- nut is offered to the gods and goddesses. The cut animals are then cooked together in a separate pan and distributed to the community members in equal share. The different meats are cooked together which in normal cooking is not done. A portion of the meat is also roasted. This transference from nature to culture is also imbued with meaning and signifies group membership. The sacrificed animals are also roasted in a separate hearth and then mixed with the rice and lentil mix (Indian khichidi) which is more in quantity and can be easily distributed.

The Kherai altar

The hierophant (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 numbering 189 are propitiated during Kherai. On the vertical side (plains) (3x20+3) and on the horizontal side (hills) (6x20+6) numbers of 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(betel nut , leaves and powdered rice) are made is based on the hierarchy of the Gods. The laizams (offerings) are spread out equally . 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 speaks of the permanence of the Bathou foundation .The festival starts with **Jumai Gathar** at Bordeori's house. The elderly folk assembles at the house of the Bordeori. The essentials and the important things are collected in the house .There is lot of enthusiasm amongst the community. Various responsibilities are shared by the people. Five pots of rice beer (jau) are prepared and kept in Bordeuri's house . Four of the pots amongst the five are placed at the kherai altar. Two of the pots are offered to Buragarang and two to the Ranpagli. The left one is for Gangar bura at the Bordeuri's house. It is not brought to the kherai altar. A cock is sacrificed by the two Bordeoris and Bailung as Prayaschit. The sacrificed cock is later cooked and is

shared as bhog . Daudini offers bettlenut as a mutual sharing with the official priests and the people who are in the charge of Kherai. They initiate their fast together and after finishing all the rituals and ceremonies of kherai end up their fast together .

- (i) **Mahila mareh** which is celebrated in the month of April. A few sacrifices are offered in the Bor Deuri's house, it is a small ritual which marks the beginning of Kherai.

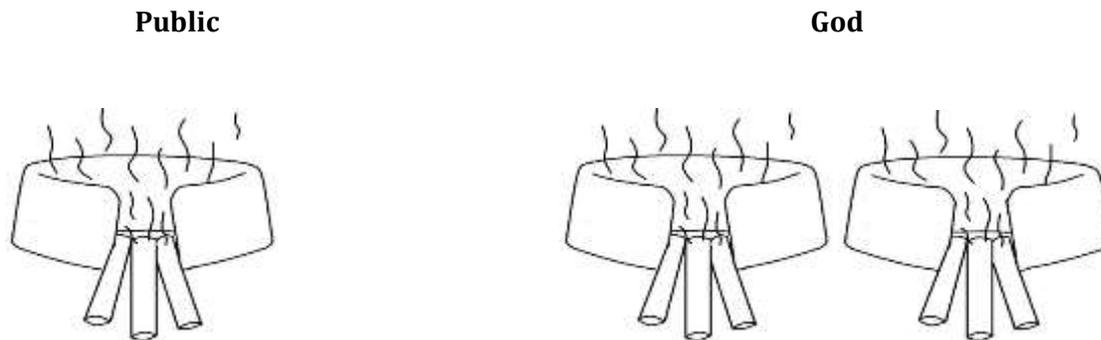
- (ii) **Zethor puja** is celebrated in the month of June. People enthusiastically participate in this ritual. Men mostly take part in it . The community offers pig sacrifice to the river goddess Bhoroli, and its attendants (eight cocks). The Bailung chants mantras seeking welfare, assuring whether the people are happy or not. Is there peace or not? The small sacrifices (8 cocks) are made and thrown into the river. The head stays intact at the altar. Finally the pig is sacrificed with much enthusiasm and spirit. The Deori performs the sacrifice. On the banks of the river Bhoroli , two fire hearths are made.

The offerings are made to the goddess Bhoroli in the river Bhoroli. Since Bhoroli is not seen, it is offered in one of the streamlet (Mansiri) about 4 kilometers from the village where the researcher was collecting data.

Two kinds of bhoga (offering) are prepared :-

- (i) Plain rice Bhoga is offered to Bhorali.

- (ii) Cooked rice and pig meat (pork) are offered to Bhoroli.



Fire hearths for public and god

diagram-1

The bhogamaker takes an earthen pot full of rice khichdi and pig meat and carries it over his head. The carrier of the bhoga is accompanied by a community member and they offer the bhoga to the river. He twists his feet and tries to make a pit and places the bhoga pot under the water. Then he quickly turns to his back and starts coming out of the river, people rejoice very much when they don't see the bhoga pot coming out. To them Goddess Bhoroli has accepted the offering. There is distribution of the prasada, Both the public and privately cooked foods are mixed and served to the people present on the occasion, There is a community feast, mostly of men, who enjoy the fowl's roasted entrails first and then the cooked special food.

- (iii) **Dangoriya puja** is celebrated in the month of July. A number of twenty-five laizams (offerings) are laid in for the propitiation of various gods and goddesses, all corresponding to Bathou. Holding the sacred water, the priest invokes Bura Dangoriya (a spirit) and says "its all because of your grace this village community has 126 households at present. Do protect us from the Maor spirits. The laizams (offerings) are placed in various directions for different gods and goddesses aiming at their abodes. During the ritual community sings hymns in praise of goddess Bhagawati. The interesting feature is that the Bailung initiates in the Bodo language whereas the Pathak recites hundred names of Bhagawati in Assamese language. The community sings the hymns of Goddess Bhagawati in Assamese language though simultaneously the Bailung forwards his ritual incantations in Bodo language.

Food habits

It is almost a cliché to say that the food items are used to mark ethnic groups. Food is eaten and forbidden in the name of ethnic identity. Sharing certain special foods communicates a positive identity and solidarity, as in, for example, the use of *Jumai* or *Jau* of the Bodos. However, ethnicity is less often marked by particular food items than by the complex rules for how to prepare the items and when to eat them. Though it has been observed that in the Bodo food structure, the cooking rules are specific, and the repertoire of the dishes is limited. It is the structure of dishes, the way they are combined in meals and certain flavors that communicate "Boronesh".

The ethnic cuisine can be represented in truest sense of term by experiencing the Bodo food preparation and diet. The Bodos basically are lovers of non-veg dishes. They have innovated ways to keep the food grades intact. Mainly food is boiled, steamed and the garnished with wild spices. They absolutely had no use of oil in earlier times. Many wild plants were used for seasoning and as ingredients in various dishes. The preparation methods were also very simple and less time consuming. Fish and certain plants were dried in sunlight and stored for a long period. The pungent taste and strong smell which is much liked by the Bodos is also the reason for its popularity. Under the influence of Hinduism, except for the cow they consume all kinds of meat they favor. The most favourite and prized possession is the pig. Every Bodo household has a pigsty and we can see them everywhere in a Bodo village. Non-veg preparations like dried fish and meat are made and stored for the difficult days when they are extremely busy in their fields. The vegetables they eat grow on their own in the forests and the backyards of their settlement. The spices they use as condiments are also found in the forests. The dried fish and meat known as *Na-goran* and *Bedor-goran* are further improvised by additional ingredients like stems of arum which are later grounded to-gather with the fish and meat stock. This is again stored in a bamboo tube and the mouth of the tube is covered with plantain leaves. The prepared product is known as Napham and can be stored for a long period.

The vegetables collected are wild plants that are used as vegetables and for medicine also. All the wild plants are of different tastes. Some are bitter, some sweet and some are tasteless too. The most common and favourite of the wild plants are '*sibru*' (a thorny plant used as a vegetable), '*doushrem*' (a kind of small creeper of sour taste) '*jaglauri*' (a scented plant) '*ungkham gajang*' (a creeper of sour taste), '*hangso ramai*, (a small plant) '*raidang*' (cane tree). The most commonly found wild vegetable is '*anthabajab*' (a small plant with scent). The Bodos cherish a special dish of '*andla khari*' that is prepared with rice powder, the chicken and the shoot of bamboo. The alkaline dishes are hot favorites for them. *Samlaothi* and *Kheradpini* are small wild plants used or vegetables.

The varieties of meats consumed by them are of the animals that are found in their environments. Bodos basically love hunting and make every effort to collect meat and wild plants for the guests and other special occasions. Most of the animals like, fowls deer, and goats are readily available at home. Community hunting and fishing is done at times for food..

Preparation of Jumai

Jau or Jumai of the Bodos carries a significant place in the social life of the Bodos. Jau is a traditional drink which is used during celebrations, other social occasions and as a regular drink. It is also used as medicine for various ailments like disorder of bowels and earlier in cholera. It is offered to the gods and the goddesses of the Bodo pantheon the community takes pleasure in preparation of Jau, which starts a month ago in the village. It can be preserved for two to three months. It is a custom of the Bodos to entertain their guests with Jau. Still another variety of traditional liquor, photika which is more raw and harmful to health is also made for commercial purpose.

The *jumai* or *jau* is prepared in a traditional system. The ingredients necessary for preparation of *jau* are *emaw* (medicine), *mokhana* (wild flowers), leaves of jackfruit tree, leaves of pine-apple tree, roots of *agarchitha* (small wild plant), *bong hang rakheb* (wild plant) and the tender leaves of the plantain tree. The above mentioned things are grinded and a paste is made and later with the paste cakes are formed. These cakes are known as *emaw*. They are kept for three to four days to dry. The cooked rice is placed on a winnowing fan and the dust of *emaw* is mixed with it. Then it is kept safely in an earthen pitcher (*maldang*) for three –four days. At the maximum without preservatives it can be kept for a week or so. The *jumai* prepared from *Bara* rice is tasty as honey. It can be preserved for more number of days.

The entire process of preparing *Jau* (traditional liquor) can be explained as a metaphor for nature versus culture. Cooking represents human ability to transform nature. Within the domain of the cooked according to Levi-Strauss in his Culinary Triangle – the raw—is contrasted with the other two points – the cooked and the rotted. Cooking signifies transformation through culture, but rotting is transformation by nature. Within the domain of the cooked, the two common processes roasting involve direct contact between fire and food, but boiling is mediated by both a pot and a cooking medium. According to Levi-Strauss, boiling is thus more culturally mediated, and roasting is closer to rawness and to nature.

Through several more steps of logic, boiling is ascribed to endo-cuisine --- that which is for domestic use, closed group; roasting belongs to exo-cuisine - what one offers to more close guests. Various cultures use food systems as elaborated domains of meaning to express important messages about relationships to sacred forces.

Conclusion

Food is one the basic human drives, the need to eat provides many opportunities and platforms for communication and interaction. Human groups select raw foods from nature, transform them through cuisine, compose meals, create cycle of meals to punctuate seasons and stages of life. Food also provides a platform for the community to stage their feelings, protest, and also creativity. It is important that the food that is offered is served aesthetically. The colour balance maintained during laying of food in festivals, ceremonies and rituals is also a visual treat. A spontaneous imagery of colour, text and motion is seen throughout the process. Hierarchy of foods is maintained even while food is consumed. Every food has a specific process of being made, and laid out. The ritual food specially has its own ritual significance. Each part of the food has its own meaning for e.g claws, entrails, head, veins etc. of an animal. Every god has to one's own credit required number of offerings. This is based on the social position that is attributed to the individual in the society. Food proves to be a marker of any society. (Douglas Mary, 1984)

Note:

The research data is taken from the researcher's own field-work.

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