



Mother *Mainao*: The Goddess of Wealth

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Abstract:

The traditional Bodos of Assam are primarily from an agricultural society and practice a traditional belief that centres on the mother earth or Goddess *Mainao*. They believe she controls the agricultural phases throughout the year from planning to harvest. Therefore, they venerate her in the name of every variety of seasonal paddies cultivated around the year; hence she is titled with the twofold designation - *Ashu Mainao* and *Sali Mainao* worshipped during the period of harvesting the *Ashu* (autumn rice) and *Sali* (winter rice). This paper attempts to highlight the significance of Goddess *Mainao* in the traditional Bodo religion.

Keywords: Bodo, Myths, *Bathou*.

Introduction:

In the traditional *Bathou* religion, Goddess *Mainao* as a chief divinity stands as an emblem of family wealth, fertility, and therefore the goddess of prosperity. She is grace, beauty, and charm incarnate. As observed earlier, the word *Mainao* is composed of two-word formations - *mai* and *no*, meaning 'paddy' and 'house' respectively because her special function is that of 'Guardian of the rice fields.' Eggs, pigs and areca nuts, and betel leaves are the offerings that find the most favour in her eyes. According to Endle (1911:37), she is in short to the Bodo peasant very much what Ceres was to the old heathen Roman cultivator. In other words, she is the source of all life and order. Those who understand and remain faithful to her are protected from misery, desolation, and poverty because all things come from her and all things return to her.

As recounted in one of the myths, the origin of Goddess *Mainao* is attributed to the metamorphosed self of Lord *Bathou Bwrai* (*Sibrai*)¹, who from his own immaculate self created her. Another Bodo formation, *kangnaini-bima-kha* or *khamaikha* meaning 'mother goddess who really brought up or created' also corroborates the pre-eminence of Goddess *Mainao* in the socio-cultural context (Mosahary 1986:36). The Bodo term *khangnai* stands for 'bringing up,' and *bima* means 'mother.' A mythical tale goes on to narrate that God *Aham Guru* incarnated as *Bathou Bwrai* and created the universe with all its ramifications but was burnt to ashes at the malevolent glance of *Luba lubini*, the 'goddess of evil.' To quote further, the mythical traditions recount that God *Bathou Bwrai* and his consort Goddess *Bathou Bwri* (*Mainao*) wanted to see the beauty and splendour of the universe again, and so they copulated. Eventually, *Kubakubini*, the 'goddess of life' was created out of their glorious union and it was through her active interference that the universe was 'brought up or created again,' i.e., *kangnaini-bima-kha*. Moreover, the Bodos believe that the term *kangnaini-bima-kha* seems to be the basis of the later version of Sanskritised *Kamakhya*, which has attained nationwide celebrity, as a renowned centre of pilgrimage for *Sakti* worship. Thus, the worship of

Kamakhya (Mainao or Bathou Bwri) (Narzary 2018:127), also constitutes an integral part of the Bodo pantheon, since she played an immense role in reviving the dead universe to life through her fertility. She is thus the birth mother, who animated the world and thereby came to be worshipped by the traditional Bodos.

In the domestic household, a bamboo pole decorated by a piece of red cloth, implanted at the *Bathou* altar symbolises this deity (Mosahary 1986:248). The red colour is not without significance, it symbolises passion and erotic excitement and the menstrual flow with which deity is associated (Sangma 2010:33). But her foremost earthly realm is inside the *nomano*², located in the *ishing*, where she is symbolised by a lump of earth, alongside her consort *Songraja* (manifestation of *Bathou Bwri*). It is to be noted that the Goddess *Mainao* has to be ritually retrieved time and again to gain her compassion and benevolence.

Apart from the community-oriented *Kherai* and *Garja* rituals, where Goddess *Mainao* is seen being propitiated and retrieved from the ritual arena, she is also retrieved individually in a domestic household. This auspicious effort of 'retrieving Goddess *Mainao*' is known as *Mainao Tissonai*. Being a retrieval ceremony, it is concerned with welcoming and appeasing Goddess *Mainao*. This ritual is usually performed by an individual family in his/her domestic homestead and has the most far-reaching sociological implications, in that it involves the entire family members. Generally conducted at night, the ritual initiates in the *ishing*, and then at the *Bathou* altar located in the courtyard and eventually terminates in the *ishing* room.

In this connection, an attempt is made to describe the *Mainao Tissonai* ritual performed in an individual homestead and also highlight its socio-cultural significance.

The Ritual Process:

The *Mainao Tissonai*³ ritual is solemnly performed by the concerned family on a scheduled day. As a customary practice, a new *Bathou* altar is constructed around the *Sijou* tree in the manner described in the *Kherai* ritual worship. The patch of ground in front of the altar is well-swept with cow dung mixed with water. The initiation of *dwi gwtwr* (holy water) by the *Ojha* and the *Douri*, on the threshold of the altar forms the preliminary rite. Subsequently, the *Douri* administers the *dwi gwtwr* all over the house and the people present there, which ceremoniously sanctifies them. Thereafter, the offerings like a bunch of banana fruit, a pair of areca nuts, and betel leaves, sprinkled with some amount of grains of rice are duly offered at the *Bathou* altar. Similarly, each of the sixteen subordinate deities seated over the extended sub-altar is also given necessary offerings.

As indicated earlier, the altars of *Songraja* and Goddess *Mainao* are invariably located in the *ishing* room symbolised by a lump of earth. The altar of Goddess *Mainao* is situated in the northeast corner of the room, while that of *Songraja* lies to the west of *Mainao* altar. The altars and the entire spot are swept clean with water and graciously decorated with powders made of rice. A *don* (basket) containing some rice, an egg, a pair of areca nuts, and betel leaves, stacked with a set of new dresses (consisting of a new *dokna*, a blouse, and a scarf), alongside a host of makeup materials like a mirror, oil, comb, bangles, gold chain, vermilion etc., are invariably kept ready. Also, a pair of *sandri sayan* (a bamboo strainer of circular shape) comprising a pair of earthen lamps properly lit, a pair of areca nuts and betel leaves, sprinkled over with some amount of rice, and this again encircled further by the outer layer of the plantain tree in a rectangular shape, top covered with a hand fan is kept ready for the rite. Two *bairatis* (unwed young girls) are given custody of this *sandri sayan* during the ritual.

The initial ritual commences in the *ishing* room where both the husband and wife assemble, assisted by the *Ojha* and *Douri*. The lighting of the earthen lamps on the altars marks the commencement of the worship. The *Ojha*, in his usual squatting posture, initiates the prayer. On behalf of the household owner, he invokes the name of God *Bathou Bwri*, Goddess *Mainao*, and a host of other deities. He addresses the objective of the worship and pleads for their blessings in successfully carrying out the worship. Welcoming

all the gods, he simultaneously begins his series of incantations. The following spell is chanted for her appeasement during the worship:

*Aaywi Song Bwri, Bima Moathansi,
Lokhi Mainao, Sali Mainao, Ashu Mainao, Basmuti Mainao,
Nimahahwdw.
Ishing singao thapoi phindw,
Kulumwaaywi nwngekou.*

Translation:

Mother *Song Bwri*, mother *Maathansi*, *Lokhi Mainao*, *Sali Mainao*, *Ashu Mainao*, *Basmuti Mainao*,
Forgive us of our sins and faults.
Come back, and stay in the innermost apartment of our main house (*ishing*),
We pray to you our mother (Narzi 1966:245-249)

After the conclusion of the incantation session, they pay their earnest obeisance and prepare themselves for the ritual at the *Bathou* altar. Thereafter, the lady (wife), holding the *don* on top of her head and the two *bairatis* carrying the *sandri sayan* exit from the *ishing* room and proceed towards the *Bathou* altar. The husband, on the other hand, has to shoulder a *jigab bunta* (a bag of paddy straws), symbolising *maiqli* (the paddy seedling) tied to bamboo. On arriving at the *Bathou* altar, the whole party circumambulates the altar five times in an anti-clockwise pattern and thereafter the *don* and the *sandri sayan* are placed on the threshold of the *Bathou* altar. The circumambulation of the altar is performed with the accompaniment of the music and shouting of slogans in the name of Goddess *Mainao* and God *Bathou Bwrai*. Eventually, the whole family members assemble around the *Bathou* altar for the ritual. The *Ojha* begins his series of incantations in the manner referred to earlier. After the conclusion of the incantation session, the musicians begin playing various musical tunes.

After paying their final prayers, they gear up for the final circumambulation of the *Bathou* altar. The surrounding space of the *Bathou* altar is laid over with the outer layers of a plantain tree. This space signifies what is known as the *sonani lama* (golden path) and the whole party has to tread over this space (path) while circumambulating the altar. Consequently, the husband hands over the *don* to his wife on top of her head. As for himself, he wraps the *jigab bunta* on a white cloth, fastens over his back, and accompanies the group. Besides, two persons are entrusted to shoulder a live pig tied to a bamboo stick. The whole party then treads over the *sonani lama* five times and eventually enters the *ishing* with the accompaniment of loud music. As they proceed toward the *ishing*, the *bairati's* carrying the *sandri sayan* walk close to the lady holding the *don* in slow retreating footsteps. Inside the *ishing*, the *don* is installed near the *maihonda* (jar).⁴ Thereafter, the owner sacrifices a pig and chicken in honour of Goddess *Mainao* and a chicken for *Songraja*. Coming back to the main *Bathou* altar, the owner sacrifices one chicken each to God *Bathou Bwrai* and all his sixteen subordinate deities. Early morning, the lady entertains the assembled people with cooked rice and *ondla* curry (curry cooked with pounded rice and chicken meat seasoned with local soda but contains no turmeric, oil, and spices). Firstly, she offers it to God *Bathou Bwrai* and Goddess *Mainao* and subsequently serves the same food to her husband and all the assembled people gathered there.⁵ The dining of meal consummates the *Mainao Tissonai* rite.

This ritual also actually symbolises the culmination of the auspicious wedding ceremony of God *Bathou Bwrai* and Goddess *Mainao* (*Bathou Bwrai*). Through this dramatic re-creation of the symbolic wedding, the glory and prosperity of the house are ensured. Moreover, the object of this sacred marriage is to ensure the fertility of the variety of seasonal paddies and other fruit trees, animals, and humankind. In this way, their sacred marriage underscores that fundamental principle - it is through the concerted effort of the gods that the fertility of the world is assured. In analogy to the classical myths, the God *Bathou Bwrai* here inherently signifies the sky god, and the Goddess *Mainao* represents the earth goddess. In a word, the ritual aims to recreate the events that took place *in principio* that is in the beginning; in a primordial and

non-temporal instant, a moment of sacred time (Eliade 1991:57). Frazer has indicated the custom of marrying gods either to images or human beings was widespread among the nations of antiquity (Frazer 1925:139-146). For instance, the marriage of the sky-god Zeus with the corn-goddess Demeter (*ibid.*:142), the sacred marriage of the god Horus and the goddess Hathor is well attested. In all these accounts, the earth represents the female, while the sky is the male spirit. These examples show clearly that the sacred marriage was a religious institution widespread since antiquity.

Moreover, if a person gets sick, or encounters a series of calamities, within a short time, it is usually assumed that Goddess *Mainao* has been deeply offended and left her abode (*ishing*). It should be noted that the goddess who gives us good fortune also gives us disease. Just like the great Mother-goddesses of other cultures, she is both a creator and destroyer – as the goddess of life and fertility; and the goddess of death and destruction. At this juncture, the owner of the house invites the *Ojha* and requests him to find out the cause. The *Ojha*, through his divination, detects the whereabouts of *Mainao*. In most cases, she is found dwelling in bamboo groves, rat holes, trees etc. So, it becomes imperative on the part of the owner to retrieve Goddess *Mainao* back to his house for the well-being of his family.

Conclusion:

Folklore accounts suggest that in olden times, during the *Kherai* ritual, the *Doudini* symbolically retrieved Goddess *Mainao* from the bosom of the river through the knowledge of altered consciousness. According to one account, the *Douri* initially concealed a *don* (basket) full of rice at the bottom of the river. The *Doudini* after her initial offerings and prayers to various gods and goddesses proceeded towards the undisclosed spot and in one dive retrieved the *don* and brought it forth to the surface of the earth. This ritual is traditionally known as *Mainao burkhangnai* in Bodo. The *Doudini*, holding the basket retreats to the *Kheraisali* (place of *Kherai*), and upon reaching there, she with her face facing eastward hurled the rice to the devotees assembled behind her. All the devotees, on their part, accumulated the rice symbolising Goddess *Mainao* and subsequently carried it to their respective houses and installed it in the *maihondo* (earthen jar where rice is stored) located in the *ishing* room.

Notes:

¹ The chief God of the *Bathou* religion.

² The significance of Goddess *Mainao* is further superimposed by the fact that *nomano* (meaning mother of the house) is dedicated to her. The Bodos attach sacredness and sanctity to the *nomano*. The entry of outsiders or strangers is taboo in this house, especially in the *ishing* compartment. They believe that if an outsider enters this house, the family deities, especially Goddess *Mainao* get offended and thus leave the house.

³ There is another rite, usually known as *Mainao lainai* or *Aglainai*, which is initially performed by a household after the harvest before paddy crops are taken into the house.

⁴ It is a big container where rice is stored.

⁵ The same modality is also seen in the traditional Bodo marriage called the *Hatashunihaba*, wherein a new bride, after the solemnisation of the wedding, has to cook a similar food referred to above, offer it first to *Bathou Bwrai* and *Bathou Bwri* and subsequently to her husband and the assembled guests.

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