

CELEBRATING NATURE-CULTURE RELATIONSHIPS

**A SACRED PLANT AND ITS PEOPLE: RITUAL
AND INDIGENOUS RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE
SIJOU PLANT IN THE BODO COMMUNITY
NEAR MANAS NATIONAL PARK, ASSAM**

Submitted by Preety Boro



Acknowledgements

I acknowledge the opportunity given by the Wildlife Conservation Society-India, Canopy Collective and the support from Rohini Nilekani Philanthropies for conducting this study under the Nature-Culture Fellowship. I extend my gratitude to the mentors, Manish Chandi, Nandini Velho, Sayan Banerjee, Ramya Nair, Navya R and the Mentors from the field site, Kirat Brahma, Rangjalu Basumatary, Nabajeet Basumatary, Rahul Das Basumatary and Nijwmshree Brahma.

I am grateful to Greenhub and the mentor Sumit Sisodiya, and fellows Chitankumar Thingbaijam, Fungbili Boro, Basilica Lyngkhai for documenting the process of our work. I thank Bubli Rani Basumatary for helping me throughout the fieldwork. I also want to thank Nature-Culture fellows, Mampi Hazarika, Raagini Muddaiah, Lobsang Tenzing Kom, and Taju Pujen for helping me throughout the process. I also thank Aditi Ramchiary for guiding me to make the study sites map.

I am deeply thankful to the Bodo community members of Rangapani, Barghagra, Dailazan, Dihira, Ambari, Bargaon, Khwla Khamardwisa, Gorumara, Bhal Manuhar Vita, Landangpara, and Hatizan villages for generously sharing their knowledge, experiences, stories, and time during the fieldwork.

I am especially grateful to the Douris, Doudini, elders, household practitioners, Rangapani Khwose Afad and cultural custodians who participated in this study and helped me understand the cultural, ritual, and spiritual significance of the Sijou plant.

I respectfully acknowledge the knowledge holders of the Bodo community, whose wisdom has been passed down through generations. It is my sincere hope that this study contributes, in some small way, to the documentation, appreciation, and continued preservation of the rich cultural and ecological heritage.

I express my deepest gratitude to my family for their unconditional love, patience, encouragement, and unwavering support throughout this fellowship. Their belief in me gave me the confidence and strength to complete this research despite the many challenges encountered during fieldwork and writing. This work would not have been possible without their constant support.

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ABSTRACT

The study examines the ritual, symbolic, material, and lived relationships between the Bodo (*Boro*) community of Assam and the Sijou plant (*Euphorbia neriifolia*), a sacred species central to *Bathouism*, the indigenous religious system of the Bodo. While ritualized plant worship has long functioned as an informal conservation mechanism in many indigenous societies, such relationships remain underrepresented in Indian scholarship, particularly in the context of Northeast India. At the forest-edge villages near Manas National Park in Northeast India, we conducted 22 interviews and participant observation to explore how religious belief, cultural practice, and ecological ethics intersect through plant-centered traditions. The primary objective of the study was to document and analyse the cultural, ritual, medicinal, and symbolic significance of the Sijou plant within Bathou religious practice, with particular attention to processes of knowledge transmission, gendered roles, and ritual authority. The findings revealed that Sijou is a sacred symbol of *Bwrai Bathou*, the supreme god for Bodos, and is associated with the cultural identity, cosmological belief and ritual practices. Respondents stated that knowledge of Sijou was primarily transmitted through family members, elders, *Douris*, rituals, folklore, and community festivals. However, they also noted changes in transmission of such knowledge due to youth migration to urban centers, modern education, and changing livelihoods. Despite social and religious changes, participants emphasized that the spiritual importance of Sijou remained strong, with cultural organisations and festivals playing an increasing role in maintaining and revitalising Bathou traditions.

Keywords: *Bathouism*; Bodo community; Sijou (*Euphorbia neriifolia*); Indigenous knowledge; ritual practices; cultural transmission; *Douris*, Ethnobotany; Assam; Northeast India



INTRODUCTION

Human societies have long understood plants not merely as biological entities, but as beings embedded with moral, spiritual, and cultural significance (Verschuuren, 2006). Across indigenous and traditional belief systems, plants mediate relationships between humans, ancestors, and the divine, shaping cosmology, ritual practice, and everyday environmental ethics (Sharma & Pegu, 2011). These culturally embedded relationships often function as informal conservation mechanisms, which regulate human interaction with nature and promote ecological stewardship (Chaachouay & Zidane, 2021). Ethnobotanical research further demonstrates that plants often serve as cultural keystone species, contributing to identity formation, spiritual practice, social organization, and the transmission of traditional knowledge across generations (Garibaldi & Turner, 2004). In many indigenous societies, knowledge associated with sacred plants is transmitted through oral narratives, ritual participation, songs, and everyday interactions, reinforcing both cultural continuity and environmental stewardship (Gadgil et al., 1993). Such plant-people relationships highlight the interconnected nature of biological and cultural diversity, where the conservation of species is also closely linked to the preservation of cultural traditions and belief systems (Maffi, 2005; Verschuuren, 2006).

Studies across different parts of the world demonstrate that ritualized plant use plays a crucial role in sustaining biodiversity and cultural continuity. For instance, research in Morocco shows that the ritual importance of plants reinforces systems of sacred protection that indirectly support biodiversity conservation (Chaachouay & Zidane, 2021). Similarly, in Yunnan, Southwest China, ritual beliefs and folklore associated with plants contribute to ecological knowledge and conservation practices (Geng et al., 2017). Plants are also linked to healing systems, where they are believed to address both physical and spiritual ailments, further reinforcing their significance in everyday life (Grob et al., 1996). Learning about traditional ecological knowledge occurs through observation, participation, and oral repetition rather than formal instruction (Grob et al., 1996), with elders serving as key custodians of ritual practices and symbolic meanings (Dafni, 2006). However, this mode of transmission to younger generations is increasingly becoming lost, as modernization, formal education, migration and religious transformation are alienating the younger members from various traditionally rooted practices (Reyes-García et al., 2013). Women and men often possess distinct but complementary forms of knowledge, with women playing a central role in domestic rituals, plant care, and the transmission of everyday practices, while men frequently occupy more formal ritual positions (Oakley, 2005). At the same time, ritual knowledge is structured within systems of authority and hierarchy, where elders or ritual specialists hold specialized knowledge and control access to sacred

practices (Gadgil et al., 1993). These systems are dynamic and can shift in response to broader socio-cultural changes (Pfeiffer & Butz, 2005).

In India, plant-based ritual practices are deeply embedded in religious and cultural traditions. Hindu cosmology, Ayurveda, and regional folk systems conceptualize plants as sentient and morally significant beings integrated into festivals, life-cycle rituals, and healing practices (Narayanan, 2001). These practices have historically contributed to biodiversity conservation through institutions such as sacred groves, which are protected through customary laws and taboos and function as important ecological refuges (Bhagwat & Rutte, 2006). However, much of this scholarship has focused on mainstream or organised religious traditions, often overlooking indigenous belief systems and their plant-centered cosmologies (Longkumer, 2017).

This gap is particularly evident in Northeast India, a region characterized by both high biological diversity and rich cultural plurality. Indigenous communities in this region maintain belief systems that emphasize reciprocal relationships between humans and nature, where plants are treated as living entities central to social and spiritual order (Maffi, 2005). Ethnobotanical studies from Assam further document the centrality of plants in ritual and healing practices, such as among the Mising community, where plants are closely tied to supernatural beliefs and cultural identity (Sharma & Pegu, 2011). Despite these insights, the specific ritual meanings and knowledge systems associated with individual sacred plant species remain insufficiently studied (Sinthumule, 2021).

Within this broader context, the Bodo community of Assam occupies a distinctive position, where the community has maintained close relationships with forests through agriculture, livestock grazing, and spiritual practices. The Bodo worldview emphasizes coexistence, where nature is understood not merely as a resource but as a living system with moral and spiritual significance (Brahma, 1992). The existing scholarship has documented aspects of Bathou philosophy, ritual structure, and identity (Goswami, 2012; Daimary & Sensarma, 2017; Bargayary & Narzary, 2022). The Bodo traditional religion, *Bathouism*, reflects a nature-centered worldview in which cosmology, ritual practice, and ecological ethics are closely interconnected (Daimary & Sensarma, 2017). However, the gap in studies becomes especially significant in context of the Sijou plant (*Euphorbia neriiifolia*), regarded as the living embodiment and within the sacred *Sijousali* (an altar where Sijou is planted and worshipped) in household courtyards. Although global and national scholarship demonstrates that ritual plants function as cultural keystone species and informal conservation tools, focused species-level studies on Sijou within the Bathou religious context needs deeper attention. Existing literature references Sijou symbolically,

but does not deeply examine its historical multifunctionality, erosion of associated knowledge, undocumented medicinal claims, or the conservation implications of cultural loss. Therefore, to focus on better understanding people-Sijou relations, we conduct this study among the forest-edge villages surrounding Manas National Park, where conservation contexts intersect with indigenous practices, and where processes such as modernization, education, migration, and religious change are actively reshaping people-nature, human-plant relationships. By situating Sijou plant as a culturally keystone significant species within a changing socio-ecological landscape, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of indigenous knowledge systems, ritual practice, and their relevance to contemporary conservation discourse in this region.

With this context, the study focuses on three key objectives:

1. To examine the ritual and symbolic relationships of the Sijou plant within Bathou religious practices.
2. To analyse processes of knowledge transmission, including intergenerational learning, gendered roles, and ritual authority.
3. To understand how changing social, religious, and economic conditions are reshaping Sijou-centered practices.



STUDY AREA

This study was conducted in Baksa district, which is an administrative unit within the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) of Assam, Northeast India (see Fig. 1). The district covers an area of approximately 2,007 km² and lies between 26°32' N to 26°58' N latitude and 91°21' E to 91°0' E longitude (Thakur et al., 2024). It is situated in an important ecological transition zone between the foothills of the Bhutan Himalayas and the alluvial plains of the Brahmaputra Valley (Daimary & Sensarma, 2017). The study area falls adjacent to Manas National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Biosphere Reserve, and Tiger Reserve. Part of the Eastern Himalayan biodiversity hotspot, the park contains riverine grasslands, semi-evergreen forests, and moist deciduous forests shaped by the Manas, Beki, and Hakua rivers (Daimary & Sensarma, 2017). This ecological richness makes the region an important interface between biodiversity conservation and indigenous livelihoods. The Critically Endangered Bengal Florican (*Houbaropsis bengalensis*) persists in grasslands around Manas National Park, including Koklabari Seed Farm, where traditional agricultural landscapes support its habitat. Its continued presence reflects long-standing relationships between people and nature, where community land-use practices and ecological knowledge have historically sustained both livelihoods and wildlife (Thakur et al., 2024).

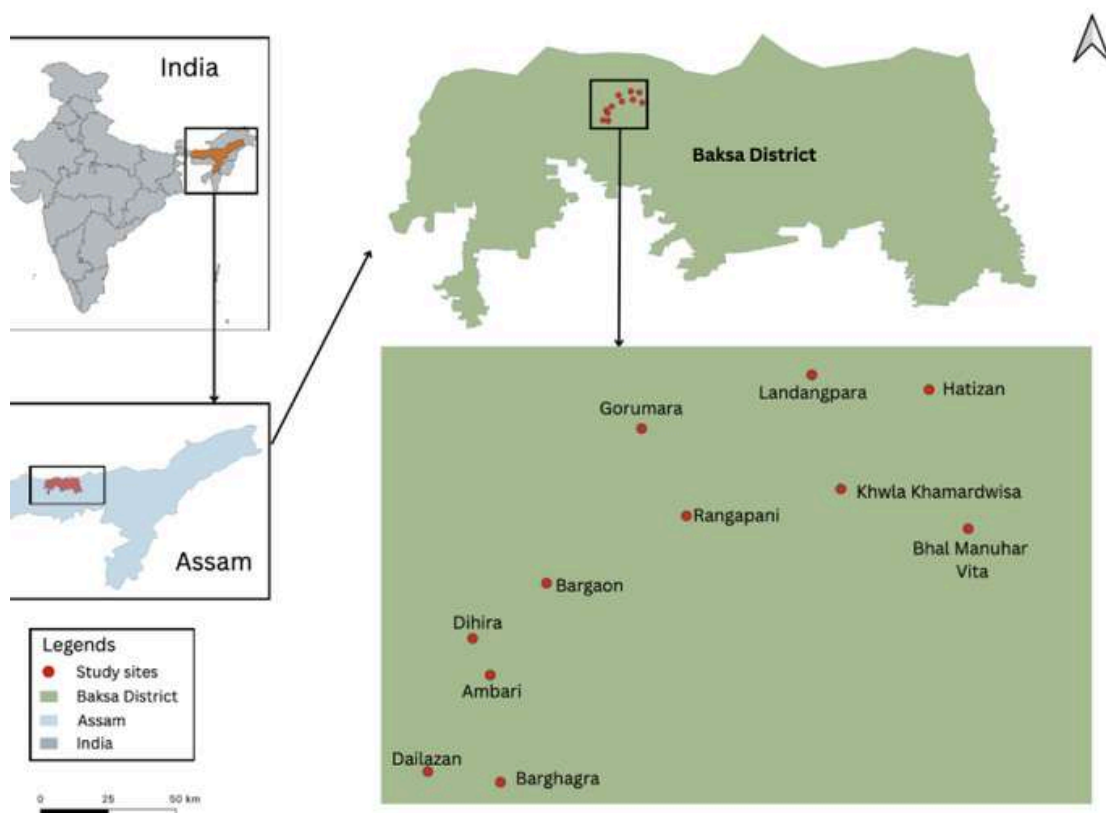


Fig. 1: Map of study site at Baksa district, BTR, Assam | Preety Boro & Aditi Ramchiary

Baksa district is predominantly rural in character, with 98.7% of its population living in rural villages (Census of India, 2011) and being dependent on wet-paddy agriculture, sali rice, livestock rearing, and extraction of natural resources (Brahma, 1992) (see Fig. 2). The Bodo community forms the largest demographic and cultural core of many villages in this region and represents one of the largest indigenous groups of the plains of Assam alongside communities like Santhali, Urao, Bengali, Nepali and Modahi that live in this region (Census of India, 2011). *Bathouism*, the traditional religion of the Bodo people that worships a supreme god *Bwrai Bathou*, remains culturally significant in many rural settlements (Endle, 1911; Daimary & Sensarma, 2017). Importantly, every traditional household maintains a *Sijousali* (or *Bathousali*) to keep the Sijou plant.



Fig. 2: Typical rural agricultural landscape of the study area | Preety Boro

The present study was conducted in eleven purposively selected forest-edge villages located in the Rangapani area along the southern boundary of Manas National Park: Rangapani, Barghagra, Dailazan, Dihira, Ambari, Bargaon, Khwla Khamardwisa, Gorumara, Bhal Manuhar Vita, Landangpara, and Hatizan. These villages were selected because they represent a shared socio-ecological landscape where indigenous communities, especially the Bodo, live near protected forests. The area provided an ideal setting for examining how sacred plant traditions, cultural identity, and ecological relationships coexist within a conservation-sensitive region. Furthermore, the selected

villages contained active Bathou-practicing households where the Sijou was maintained within household *Sijousali* altars. This made the sites ideal for studying the ritual, symbolic, and everyday significance of the Sijou plant. Another important reason for selecting this site is the rapid social transformation occurring in the region. Processes such as migration, formal education, livelihood diversification, religious change, and market integration are influencing younger generations and reshaping traditional ritual practices. Despite these transformations, the forest-edge villages around Manas National Park continue to represent a living landscape where cultural heritage, environmental change, and conservation realities can be studied together.



METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative approach to investigate the lived, symbolic, and relational dimensions of the Sijou plant within Bathou religious practice. Ethnographic methods are uniquely suited for examining indigenous religious systems where knowledge is often transmitted orally and enacted through ritual performance rather than codified texts (Smith, 2021). The research questions prioritize the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of cultural phenomena, seeking to uncover the interpretations and experiences of ritual practitioners. While our study did not use long-term ethnography due to time constraints, we used ethnography-inspired methods combining participant observation of diverse rituals, maintaining fieldnotes, semi-structured interviews and group discussions that were conducted at the village *Bathou Thansali* (place where all villagers come to worship Sijou), where both men and women were present (see Fig.3).



Fig. 3: Bathou Thansali at Dailazan village | Preety Boro

PB (Preety Boro) conducted fieldwork between January to May 2026. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that the selected sites were ‘information-rich’, and directly relevant to the research objectives (Patton, 2014). Specific villages were chosen based on three primary criteria including 1) The density of Bathou-practicing households; 2) the active ritual maintenance of the *Sijousali*; and 3) varying degrees of exposure to modernization and religious syncretism. This selection strategy allows for a comparative understanding of cultural continuity and transformation across different socio-environmental contexts (Yin, 2018) across Baksa district.

Participants were identified using snowball sampling, a method particularly effective for reaching specialized cultural groups and ritual specialists (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). This helped us identify key informants for the study, including village elders' ritual specialists (*Douris* and *Doudinis*), elders, women, men, youth, and musicians. The participants were then stratified to capture a holistic view of the community, and across age and gender. We interviewed two distinct ritual specialists - *Douris* (priests) and *Doudinis* (spirit mediums) to document formal ritual practices and household practitioners responsible for the daily upkeep of the *Sijousali* altar. Further, we interviewed cultural custodians such as musicians and elders familiar with the *Serja* (traditional musical instrument) to document the material culture of this instrument and historical uses of the Sijou plant.

Ethical Consideration

Ethical approval to conduct the study was obtained from Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) at Wildlife Conservation Society – India (HREC Approval No.- HREC-2026-01-Preety). Before conducting interviews, participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their voluntary participation, and their verbal consent was recorded. Participants were free to decline answering any question or withdraw from the interview at any time. Interviews were carried out using an interview guide consisting of different thematic, open-ended questions and the responses were recorded with permission from the participants, using a cellphone and camera (see Fig. 4 & 5). Interviews were conducted in Bodo language and lasted for 1 to 1.5 hours.



Fig. 4: In-depth interview with a Bodo village elder at Dailazan village | Preety Boro



Fig. 5: Group interview with the Bodo community members at Gorumara village | Mainao Baro

PB is a member of the Bodo community with a fluency in Bodo language, and her existing cultural and social ties allowed her access to initial informants and participation in traditional ceremonies not from an external lens, but as a member of the community. During the fieldwork period, PB was assisted by a local field volunteer. Before initiating the study, she obtained permission from the village Gaonbura (village headman) and informed the community about the purpose of the research. This facilitated access to participants and helped ensure respectful engagement with local customs and traditions. From each village, key informants were selected through snowball sampling. The participants were considered key informants because they possessed specialized knowledge and experience related to religious practices, Sijou worship, oral traditions, ritual performance, and cultural heritage. Belonging to the community allowed for culturally sensitive and responsible fieldwork, deeper interpretation of indigenous knowledge systems, and meaningful documentation of changing Sijou-centered practices.

To supplement interview data, PB carried out participant observation at two ritualistic ceremonies (see Fig. 6, 7 & 8): 1), a daily Sijou ritual and 2) the bigger ritual of the first day of *Bwisagw* festival. *Bwisagw* is the most important traditional festival of the Bodo people and marks the beginning of the Bodo New Year, usually celebrated in mid-April. Within Bathou traditions, *Bwisagw* is associated with the worship of the Sijou plant. Many participants in the study explained that prayers are offered to the Sijou during *Bwisagw*, and in every village new Sijou saplings are planted as a symbol of growth, continuity, and blessings for the coming year.

PB attended seven rituals in her own village and conducted interviews and participant observation of their daily rituals, arrangements of the *Sijousali*, symbolic enactments, and social roles. This method was critical for understanding the everyday, lived relationships of people and the Sijou, whilst identifying the gap between how participants describe a ritual and how it is performed in ceremonial contexts (Musante, 2015). To ensure a rigorous and transparent record of the research process, a field diary was maintained throughout the fieldwork.



Fig. 6: Daily practice of Sijou ritual at home | Preety Boro



Fig. 7: Participant observation and documentation of Sijou-related rituals during 1st day of Bwisagw, at Dailazan village | Chitankumar Thingbaijam



Fig. 8 Participant observation and documentation of Sijou-related rituals during 1st day of Bwisagw, at Khwla Khamardwisa village | Preety Boro

DATA ANALYSIS

All interview data were translated to and transcribed in English. Transcripts and field notes were then analyzed thematically on an Excel sheet, with attention to patterns of beliefs and ritual practices related to the Sijou, differences in knowledge and practices for different respondent groups with respect to gender and age, links between socio-ecological change at the place and its effect on Sijou-related practices (Green, 2024). Initial coding was focused on descriptive codes emerging directly from participants' testimonies, and later these codes were grouped into larger analytical themes, with respect to our objectives. Across responses, such themes were then compared and contrasted.



RESULTS

A total of 22 interviews (of which seven were key informants) were conducted over a duration of nine weeks of field work. Among the respondents, 14 were men and 8 women, all from the Bodo community and among the male participants, 8 were *Douris* (ritual priests), and among the female participants, one was a *Doudini*. This indicated gendered distinctions in ritual roles in Bathou religious practice, with *Douris* being predominantly male and *Doudinis* being largely female, although a small number of men may also perform this role. The primary occupation of most respondents was agriculture. A few participants represented specialized and relatively rare cultural roles, including one *Serja* maker and another *Serja* player. The study covered 11 villages, with the highest number of interviews conducted in Rangapani village.

The interviews generated 5 major themes: i) Knowledge transmission, ii) Sacredness, symbolism and spiritual belief, iii) Ritual practices, iv) Cosmology and ecological belief, v) Changing/ cultural loss and transformation. Among these, the “sacredness, symbolism and spiritual belief” emerged as the most dominant theme, indicating the centrality of spiritual and symbolic interpretations of the Sijou plant in Bathou belief systems of the Bodo community.

Ritual and symbolic relationship of the Sijou plant within Bathou religious practices

The Sijou plant (see Fig. 8 & 9) was present at all the respondents' houses, in the front yard. All claimed to worship the plant daily, during the evening time. Describing this daily worship practice, an elderly participant said *“I worship Sijou every evening by cleaning Bathousali, putting diya (lamp) and offering flowers. I always put incense sticks and worship Bathou everyday for our family's peace and wellbeing. In the village, we select Douri, and every evening they have to clean the temple, and put diya for village peace and for the public.”* While household level worship and rituals around Sijou was most common, the relation between the plant and the people transcended daily practices, to the realm of philosophies of being in the world.

Participants emphasized that Sijou was not merely a plant, but a living deity. They described elements (*Mwnba Totto*), namely Sky (*Okbrang*), Sun/Fire (*San*), Air (*Bar*), Water (*Dwi*), and Earth (*Ha*), and how the five ridges/lines of the plant captured these five elements of the ecosystem and the thorns are of two pairs representing male and female. An elderly woman explained how these elements represented *Atma Totto* (the philosophy of the soul) as a symbol of worship in Bathou religion. The term Bathou is interpreted as ‘Ba’ means ‘five’ and ‘Thou’ means ‘deep’ referring to these five fundamental elements. These elements were described as essential to both the universe and the human body, structuring life cycles with birth, growth, marriage, happiness, sadness and death. The five



Fig. 9: Sijou plant (*Euphorbia neriifolia*) | Preety Boro

ridges of Sijou were frequently interpreted as symbolic of these elements, reinforcing its role as a bridge between the human body, nature, and the cosmos. The sacred altar where Sijou is planted and worshipped is traditionally enclosed by eighteen pairs of bamboo fences, which hold ritual and symbolic significance in Bathou religious practice. Within Bodo communities, this sacred space is commonly referred to as either Bathousali or Sijousali, as it serves as the primary site for the worship of the Sijou plant, the symbol of *Bwrai Bathou*.

Other participants, such as a middle-aged *Douri*, who has been serving for the past four years, emphasised that Sijou is a living symbol of *Bwrai Bathou*, the supreme creator. According to him, “*Sijou represents nature itself, and we believe that the Sijou plant never truly dies.*” Explaining how festivals such as *Bwisagw* are closely linked to Sijou, he said that “*Sijou is closely associated with five major Bathou festivals: Bwisagw, Songsari, Amthi Sua, Se-kati, and Magw.*” According to him, “*Bwisagw is an agricultural festival celebrated in the month of April, offering prayers to new Sijou plantation in every particular house.*”

Songsari is also a ritual given in the *Bathou Thansali* where new first fruits like mangoes and fern leaves are given as an offering to the Sijou. After that ritual only Bodo people get to eat the fruits and fern leaves. *Amthi Sua* is also a festival where people do not worship Sijou and keep it closed for whole 1 week, and no other works related to cultivation are done. *Se-kati* is celebrated as a *Kherai* festival where *Doudini* dance near the Sijou plant, there is a belief that in *Doudini's* soul God spirit enters and she dances in sword. *Magw* is also a festival where cowherds, young boys and girls early in the morning worship Sijou and go from door to door to collect rice cakes early in the morning. Offering rice cakes to Sijou is also done on that day.



Fig. 10: Performance of Aros (prayer) by village male elders at Khamardwisa Khwilashphuri village, Dularai Bathou Gouthum Thansali for appeasing Bwrai Bathou during Bwisagw festival | Preety Boro



Fig. 11: Performance of Aros (prayer) by women at Khamardwisa Khwilashphuri village, Dularai Bathou Gouthum Thansali for appeasing Bwrai Bathou during Bwisagw festival | Preety Boro

The ritual significance of *Bwisagw* (see Fig. 10 & 11) was further explained by another middle-aged *Douri*, who described it as a period of spiritual purification and renewal. According to him, “*Over the years, we engage in farming and various activities; we might cut down trees to build houses. Since those trees had life, it is considered a sin. We also till the earth for farming, which might unintentionally kill insects or small creatures. This too is a sin. To atone for these actions, we offer prayers to Bwrai Bathou on the 1st of Bwisagw, asking for peace and prosperity for our families and children in the coming year.*”

The festival on the first day of *Bwisagw*, even though performed a bit differently in different villages and districts, consisted of a particular song that revolved around the number 5, which was regarded as auspicious by the Bodos. The song contains a reference to the *Sijou* plant, and it goes like the following:

*Sijou aa siriba,
Bathouni bandwaa bandwba,
Sifungni gudungaa gudungba,
Thaigirni khongaa kongba,
Boro bwraini raowa fongba,*

Translation: *Sijou has five ridges,
Bathou fence has five bindings,
Flute has five holes,
Elephant fruit has 5 ridges,
Bodo ancestors have five words.*

Before rituals related to the *Sijou* plant gets started, the *Douri* has to chant the following hymn to appease the supreme God *Bwrai Bathou* as a form of connecting the God to the living creatures, human and non-human alike.

Hymn:

*Ong Hing Kbling Fwt Se 5 times
Dohai Apha swrjigiri Bwrai Bathou,
Khulumw nung bifa khwo dohai,
He apha swrjigiri Bwrai Bathou,
Khwnasong, khwnasong, apha nung khwnasong,
Lama dothani mugasong,
Swrgwyao dongbla swrgwao thananwi khwnasong,
Mwidamao dongbla mwidamao thananwi khwnasong,
Buhumao dongbla buhumao thananwi khwnasong,*

Mwidera gabw odal gudiyao
Mansi jibi jwng nwng biphani apha gudiyao dohai.
He Apha swrjigiri Bwrai Bathou,
Bawdwng hwnnanwi dasan nwngkhwo
Dawboalai swmakhai, dawkhayalai phurakhai
Lwithwabw ranakhai, ai thwidwng aikhwo bwgardwng
Aapha thwidwng, aphakhwo bwgardwng
Bawakhai bawakhai
Apha jwng nwngkhwo sabinw khulumnw garakhai,
Manwna nwngnw jabai be bilad lwithwni bigwma
Okhrangni giri rajkhumbri
Sanni giri sanja bwraili, Barni giri khaila
Hani giri hailung, Dwini giri bima Dwikhungri,
Khangna bana alw gwjwn phwthagna lakhigra
Dukhu daha mwsahwgra, swgabgra, minihwgra, khwiphwd aphwd nidanni giri.
He apha swrjigiri Bwrai Bathou,
Bekhainw nwng apha nwngkhwo phwthaginanwi
Dinwini be gwthar sanao, nwng biphani thanao
Alari phwjwngnanwi, thub^{am}thuna saonanwi
Nwngninw swrjinai bibar bilai
Phithai samthai phul prasad baonanwi
Goi phathwi jora hwnanwi ^{am}amug gamini biyabni^{am}
Raijw rajaphwra boibw jo jananwi
Amug thamug phurbwni thakhai
Khulumdwng sibiwdwng apha gwrbw baonanwi
Beobai jwngni dinwini gwthar phurbwkhwo najaonanwi
Jeblabw gwjwnwi dwiden langdw apha biyabni amug
Gamini raijw rajakhwo
Khulumw nwng biakhwo dohai dohai.

Translation: Have mercy, O Father, Creator, *Bwrai Bathou*,
 I bow down and offer my reverence to you, Father, have mercy.
 O Father, Creator, *Bwrai Bathou*,
 Listen, listen, O Father, please listen,
 Guide us through the paths and eras of life,
 If you are in heaven, listen to us from the heaven,
 If you are in the plains, listen to us from the plains,
 If you are on this earth, listen to us from the earth.
 Even the wild elephants cry out at the base of the Adal tree,
 Human beings, animals, and birds all plead at the feet of you, the Father.
 O Father, Creator, *Bwrai Bathou*,

Don't think that we forget you,
 The white egret has not become black, the crow has not become white,
 The vast ocean has not dried up, If mother is gone, we leave mother behind,
 If father is gone, we leave father behind,
 But we have never, ever forgotten you, Father.
 We have never stopped worshipping and bowing down to you.
 Because you are the owner of the ocean,
 Owner of the sky, as the King
 The master of the sun, the morning star, the master of the wind, the powerful warrior
 deity
 The master of the land, deity of land, the master of the water, Goddess of water.
 The one who raises and nurtures us, sustaining our lives in peace and happiness,
 The one who makes us dance through sorrow and pain, who makes us cry, who makes us
 laugh
 The Lord of all dangers, crises, and hardships.
 O Father, Creator, Bwrai Bathou, therefore, Father, placing our complete faith in You,
 On this sacred day today, at your holy altar, we light the diya,
 We offer the incense, we offer the flowers and leaves created by you,
 By offering fruits, flowers and holy prasad,
 By offering pairs of betel nuts and betel leaf, [Name of the village]
 Villagers, all gathering together for the festival of [Name of the festival/occasion],
 We pray and worship, father, offering our hearts.
 Please accept our holy offerings here today,
 O Father, please guide the people of [Name of the village]
 Villagers, we bow to you, Father, have mercy, have mercy.

Participants frequently narrated myths and oral histories to explain the sacred relationship between the Bodo and the Sijou. An elderly respondent recounted how *Mwnsingsing Bwrai*, the ancestral leader of the Bodo people, guided his community during a period of wandering in search of food and water. According to the story, a divine presence instructed him to settle in a particular place and marked the location with a thorny plant. This plant later became associated with divine protection, guidance, and sustenance. As the community prospered, people came to regard the plant as a manifestation of the divine and seeing the mysterious plant, the people asked, "*Eꣳswr?*" (Who is He?) As they could not identify the divine presence behind it, they began referring to it as *Eswr*, meaning the unknown or unseen divine being and *SiꣳBwrai* as it was the ancient soul. Over time, the plant became known as Sijou with an etymology of Si-Soul and Jou-Highest. It became the central symbol of Bathou worship, representing God, protection, and the connection between humans, nature, and the spiritual world.

A Douri stated that "when there was only water and no trees, Sijou was the first living thing to sprout upon the rocks. That is why it is called Rojo-Jib (the first living plant)."

Such narratives portrayed Sijou as the first manifestation of life on earth and strengthened its significance as a sacred symbol of creation in Bathou belief.

Similarly, the head *Douri* of Bathou Ansolik highlighted the protective function of Sijou in Bodo households (see Fig. 12). He stated that, *“If you plant Sijou as a fence, it’s believed that ghosts and evil spirits cannot enter. That is a belief of the Bodo people, that if you surround your place with Sijou, those spirits can’t get in. People still plant it for that reason.”*



Fig. 12: Sijou plant used as protective fencing at Gorumara village | Preety Boro

The 18-bamboo post is made up of only single bamboo (see Fig. 13). Two elderly *Douris*, explained, *“In these 18 pairs, we have 18 Gurus (spiritual teachers). These are all Gurus. Because there are many Gurus, we arrange these pillars in a specific way: one represents the male and another represents the female. One is ‘bent inward’ is male and another is ‘bent outward’ is female. That is how the pillars are alternated, male and female, to make 18 pairs.”*



Fig. 13 Eighteen bamboo pillars used as fencing the Sijou plant. The horizontal parts of the fencing are called *Bandwba* (five bindings) and the vertical, pointed parts are called *Jidaine-jora* (eighteen pairs) | Preety Boro

Now, each of these pillars has a specific name (see Table 1):

Sl.No	Pillar names	Roles
1	<i>Mwnsingsing Bwrai & Mwnsingsing Burwi</i>	They are the creators of human beings. They were the first messengers and thinkers of God.
2	<i>Si-Bwrai & Si-Burwi</i>	They were the first creators and seekers of God's thoughts. They were created after <i>Mwnsingsing Bwrai</i> and <i>Burwi</i> .
3	<i>Aham Bwrai & Aham Burwi</i>	They are the teachers and seekers of religious philosophy and Mantra (spiritual chants). They thought about how religion came to be and how we should live, the rules of conduct and customs.

4	<i>Ihiu Bwrai & Ihiu Burwi</i>	These two are the creators of the <i>Kherai</i> dance and its various movements. They developed 18 types of <i>Kherai</i> dance steps.
5	<i>Haphao Bwrai & Haphao Burwi</i>	They are the organizers of religious systems-figuring out how to perform rituals so that God will accept them.
6	<i>Khwriya Bwrai & Khwriya Burwi.</i>	They are the creators of <i>Kham</i> (drum) and <i>Sifung</i> (flute). If someone asks who first created the drum or the flute, it was them.
7	<i>Mohila Bwrai & Mohila Burwi</i>	They created the village judicial system. They are like village elders who decide the laws for the community, and discuss and teach those laws.
8	<i>Bwrli Bwrai & Bwrli Burwi</i>	They are the creators of language, literature, and education.
9	<i>Song Bwrai & Song Burwi</i>	They are the observers of the universe. They looked at the stars and the sky and tried to understand what those things were and how they shine.
10	<i>Khaila Bwrai & Khaila Burwi</i>	They are the seekers of the relationship between life (Si) and the Sijou plant. They thought about where life comes from and how humans are born. They looked at the connection between Bodos and the Sijou plant and what the meaning of that relationship is.
11	<i>Agrang Bwrai and Agrang Burwi</i>	They are the creators of building, weaving, and the intricate designs and crafts Bodos have.

12	<i>Joumon Bwrai and Joumon Burwi</i>	They are the ones who oversee Bodo customs and the changing of the seasons. For instance, Bodos have specific times for everything: Bodos plant rice in the months of <i>Asar</i> and <i>Saon</i> , and harvest it in <i>Kati</i> and <i>Agon</i> . Then in the month of <i>Magw</i> , Bodos build and burn the Bhelagur (straw shelters). Eventually, <i>Bwisagw</i> arrives, marking the start of a new year where Bodos pray for a good life and a happy household. They are the ones who established these seasonal patterns.
13	<i>Hajw Bwrai and Hajw Burwi</i>	They guide Bodos spiritual path. Sometimes, people get distracted and choose the path of sin, which leads to spiritual death. But others believe Bodos must follow the divine path to find a good life in the future and for our families to prosper. That's what they teach, the path of Dharma.
14	<i>Gongar Bwrai and Gongar Burwi</i>	They are the ones associated with politics and governance.
15	<i>Rozong Bwrai and Rozong Burwi</i>	They created their traditional tools and household items like the <i>Khada</i> (baskets), <i>Zekhai</i> (Fishing net), and <i>Khobai</i> (bamboo baskets for taking fish).
16	<i>Hasung Bwrai and Hasung Burwi</i>	They oversee the Bodo economy, how to earn money, and how to spend it wisely.
17	<i>Emau Bwrai and Emau Burwi</i>	They are like doctors. They are the ones who found the traditional medicines and the knowledge of the <i>Oja</i> (traditional healers).
18	<i>Mainao Bwrai and Mainao Burwi</i>	They are the providers of food and the ones who taught us how to farm. Bodos worship them because, without food, they cannot survive.

Participants reported that Sijou is typically planted in the north-eastern corner of the courtyard to align with purity and positive energy. Multiple respondents explained that *"We plant it there so that as soon as we wake up and look out, we see God. It's there to protect us from all the sorrows and dangers of the world."* Another respondent explained, *"You will see a kitchen on the north side and a grain store on the east side. Since we keep these places clean and pure so that the northeast corner is considered clean, we keep Sijou on the Northeast side."*

From these testimonies, we see the centrality of the Sijou plant in the Bodo community's lifeworld, where it is not only worshipped as a daily practice but also gets enmeshed into myths and beliefs about the evolution of life itself.

One middle-aged participant explained the *Pherenga Lanjai* (Drongo's tail) (see Fig. 14), *"According to oral tradition, all the birds and animals gathered to choose a king. To determine the strongest and bravest among them, they were given a difficult challenge: they had to pass through a vessel of boiling oil. One by one, the animals and birds attempted the task, but failed. Even the powerful birds could not endure the heat. The adjutant stork also tried, but the heat burned the feathers on its head, leaving it bald, while other birds also failed. When the small drongo (Pherenga) came forward, the others laughed at it because of its size. Despite being small, the drongo successfully passed through the boiling oil and emerged victorious. It is said that before undertaking the challenge, the bird was white-coloured, but after passing through the hot oil, its body became black. As the winner, the drongo was honoured by all the animals and birds."*



Fig. 14: *Pherenga Lanjai* (Drongo's tail) | Preety Boro

In Bathou symbolism, the forked tail of the drongo came to represent victory, courage, intelligence, and perseverance. For this reason, the upper ends of the Bathou fence posts are cut into a shape resembling the drongo's tail, known as *Pherenga Lanjai*.

Knowledge transmission, including intergenerational learning, gendered roles, and ritual authority

Intergenerational knowledge transmission related to the Sijou plant and the knowledge and practices around it occurred through myths, folklore, dreams, and learning practices passed down through elders. Participants highlighted that knowledge of worship practices, cosmology, and ritual rules is primarily inherited through family and community elders. One of the middle-aged interviewees explained, *"Since my parents were worshipping the Sijou plant, we also started to worship that plant in the same way. Now, our child also prays in the same way."* Folklore also plays an important role in explaining ritual symbols associated with the Sijou altar. Similar to the symbolic meanings attached to the Sijou plant and the five elements, 18 bamboo posts at the altar represent the concept of *Daothu Bikha* (Dove's Heart) (see Fig. 15), highlighting the philosophy of Bathou belief. An elderly respondent explained, *"According to oral tradition, in the early days when people were learning how to worship, they struggled to understand how to truly connect with God. They could offer flowers, light diyas, and perform rituals, but something essential was still missing. The elders and spiritual guides taught that God cannot be reached only through external offerings. What matters most is the state of the heart. To explain this, they introduced the idea of Daothu Bikha: 'Dao' refers to offering or worship, 'Thu' refers to collection or gathering, and 'Bikha' refers to the heart. Together, Daothu Bikha represents the human heart gathered in devotion. It is called 'Dove's Heart' because the dove is seen as a symbol of peace, purity, and gentleness. Just like a dove's heart is calm and pure, a person must keep their heart steady, clean, and sincere while worshipping."*

Knowledge about Sijou is primarily transmitted through family practices, oral traditions, and religious participation. Most of the respondents explained that they learned about the Sijou from their parents, grandparents, elders, *Douris*, and by participating in Bathou rituals from their childhood onwards. Myths, stories, songs, and prayers at *Bathou Thansali* served as an important means of passing cultural and religious knowledge across generations. Gender played an important role in shaping the transmission of ritual knowledge and responsibilities. Women participated actively as worshippers, household caretakers of the *Sijousali*, and *Doudinis*, while the role of *Douri* remained predominantly male. Several respondents explained that ritual authority has traditionally been associated with men due to beliefs regarding ritual purity. However, participants also



Fig. 15 *Daothu Bikha (Dove's Heart)* | Preety Boro

described emerging changes, noting that women increasingly participated as *Lengai Douri* (assistant priests) and contributed to ritual activities alongside male practitioners. This suggested that while gendered distinctions remained, women continued to play important roles in maintaining and transmitting Bathou traditions.

Knowledge transmission extended beyond religious worship to include cultural skills, material traditions, and ethnomedicinal knowledge associated with the Sijou plant. Participants explained that knowledge about *Serja* making (see Fig. 16 & 17), traditional healing practices, and the cultural significance of Sijou was historically passed down through elders, *Douris*, *Ojas* (traditional healers), and skilled craftspeople. One craftsman explained that “the *Serja* comes from Sijou too”. While several elders recalled that Sijou wood was traditionally preferred for making the instrument because of its

light weight, durability, and distinctive sound quality. Knowledge of Serja making was primarily learned through observation and apprenticeship; however, participants expressed concern that this knowledge is declining. As one respondent noted, *"No one knows how to carve them anymore"*.



Fig. 16: Serja musical instrument made of Sijou plant | Preety Boro



Fig. 17: Ramesh Boro from Bargaon is the last person remaining who makes Serja from the Sijou plant | Preety Boro

Participants frequently used myths and folklore to explain the spiritual significance of Sijou. Among these was a story describing the origin of the Serja, a traditional musical instrument of the Bodo community. According to a Bodo myth, the origin of the *Serja* is linked to two brothers, *Dwnching* and *Mwnsing*, the sons of an old man named *Khoria Bwrai*. One day, their father overheard a cock proclaiming that whoever ate its head would become a king. Curious to test the prophecy, he killed and cooked the cock, but while he was away, the two brothers unknowingly ate the meat. Fearing their father's anger, their mother advised them to flee. The brothers wandered through forests and across rivers for many days until they became separated. *Dwnching*, the elder brother, was carried away by a heron king to a distant kingdom whose ruler had recently died. There, he was chosen and crowned king, fulfilling the cock's prophecy. Meanwhile, *Mwnsing* was left alone and eventually became a cowherd in his brother's kingdom, though neither recognised the other. Saddened by his fate, *Mwnsing* often wept. One night, the sacred Sijou plant appeared in his dream and instructed him to make a musical instrument from its wood. The dream recurred for three consecutive nights, and he followed the instructions carefully, using materials from animals and plants to create the first *Serja*. As *Mwnsing* learned to play the instrument, its melodies became renowned for their extraordinary power. Through the music of *Serja*, he expressed the story of his life and sufferings. When he performed before the king, *Dwnching* recognised him as his long-lost brother. The two were reunited, and *Dwnching* shared half of his kingdom with *Mwnsing*. This myth explains the origin of the *Serja* and highlights the sacred role of the Sijou plant as a source of wisdom, creativity, and transformation in Bodo tradition.

Medicinal knowledge was similarly transmitted through elders, traditional healers, and everyday household practices. Participants described the use of Sijou leaves, roots, latex, and sap for treating coughs, stomach ailments, ear infections, wounds, abscesses, and other common illnesses. One elder explained that *"roasted Sijou leaves mixed with honey were given to children to treat coughs, while others described the use of roots for stomach problems and latex for infections."* However, several respondents noted that these practices are becoming less common due to the availability of modern healthcare and pharmaceuticals. As one participant stated, *"But now there is available pharmacy, so we use cream,"* while another explained, *"Now we have medicinal facilities, so people are not using Sijou plant as medicine."*

Despite these changes, participants emphasised that knowledge of the medicinal and cultural value of Sijou continues to survive through oral transmission, religious teachings, and community memory. Elders, *Douris*, and cultural practitioners continue to share this knowledge with younger generations, although many respondents expressed concern that such specialised knowledge is no longer being transmitted as effectively as in the past.

Changing social, religious, and economic conditions around Sijou-centered practices.

Religious change among Bodos, either to Hinduism or Christianity, is causing changes in Sijou-related practices. While Hinduism retains certain aspects of nature worship, Sijou worship is often taken as an ancillary practice within Hindu rituals. On the other hand, families that have converted to Christianity have altogether stopped worshipping Sijou or any other kind of nature worship. Describing this effect of religious conversion, one respondent mentioned, *"Nowadays, coming from Hinduism, people have started reading the Bhagavad Gita, and with television constantly showing the Mahabharat and Ramayan, Hinduism has taken deep root in our people's minds. Little by little, in our lifestyle, our speech, and our way of worshipping Bathou, the influence of Hinduism is everywhere."* Another one claimed, *"There are also some Hindu institutions. These Hindu institutions promote Sanatan Dharma, and many accept it. They don't come back to Bathou; instead, they move towards Brahma Dharma and give Abuti. When we look at it from the outside, this is what we see. We have been living in this environment and observing these practical changes."*

In parallel to religious changes, the other social change that is affecting Bodo-Sijou relations is the migration of youth from villages to urban centres, often outside the state of Assam itself. Accepting the fact that there is limited income opportunity for the youth at the villages, which fuelled this migration, a respondent mentioned, *"people are going to different places, for study or other purposes. After coming back, some of them totally started to move away from it (Bathouism). After going to other places and gaining new experiences, they eventually stop accepting Sijou."* People felt that parents were also not encouraging the young people to hold on to knowledge related to Bathou religion. Migration and religious conversion, in one respondent's opinion, have caused confusion among the younger generation, and very few younger members were getting involved in the ritual practices.

Participants mentioned that traditional knowledge transmission has changed over time. An elderly respondent explained, *"I have been noticing some changes over time, like earlier the relationship with Sijou plant was deeper in terms of ritual, traditional and even for protection it was used. But the knowledge that should be transferred to the child is weak, in terms of migration, and also the changes in housing structures, so there is limited space for the Sijou, because of which people are not keeping the Sijou plant for a long time (see Fig. 18). Due to this, even the Serja which were made before are now decreasing, and people are making it from different trees. Now we have medicinal facilities, so people are not using the Sijou plant as medicine. But people have never stopped worshipping Sijou."*



Fig. 18: A large Sijou plant at Dailazan village | Preety Boro

Earlier learning occurred mainly within the household and through direct observation of rituals, but today knowledge is increasing because it is shared through organisations like the *Dularai Bathou Gouthum* (All Bodo Bathou Association) and community festivals during the months of *Bwisagw*, *Magw*, and *Kati*, which maintain a connection with the cultural heritage.

Despite concerns about declining knowledge of medicinal uses, Serja making, and ritual symbolism, respondents believed that awareness of Sijou worship remained strong.

Participants also highlighted changes in ritual practices, particularly the gradual replacement of animal sacrifice with offerings of flowers and prayers (See Fig. 19), as one respondent stated, *“People at that time, their rites and rituals involved sacrifices. But now we are slowly correcting this with flowers and worshipping Sijou.”*



Fig. 19: Offering flowers for a new plantation of a Sijou plant at Dihira | Preety Boro

Participants also noted the differences between local Bathou traditions and more organised forms, suggesting diversity in practice. While elders maintained detailed knowledge of these rituals and meanings, there are indications that younger generations engaged with them but in more limited or changing ways. One respondent explained that *“some youths are now engaging with Sijou through participating in celebrations of festivals like Bwisagw and Kherai, with cultural programs. This is different from before, as practices were mostly family-based and it was not in a structured way.”* The knowledge transmission is not fully disappearing but is adapting to contemporary social and educational contexts, ensuring the continued relevance of the Sijou within Bodo cultural and religious life. He also explained, *“there is a growing trend now through education, as you have come to me today in search of Sijou and the relation with the people; this is how school, colleges are offering students to learn. Now knowledge is transferred in a more digital way.”*

Participants also described feelings of peace, protection, and personal transformation through worship, highlighting the role of ritual in providing both spiritual and physical

support. Women participated in rituals as worshippers and *Doudinis*, while *Douris* roles are predominantly held by men. One middle-aged respondent said, “*Women have certain monthly cycles, and because of that, they are generally not chosen. Their bodies are considered to go through periods where they aren't clean. If we have to go somewhere sacred and there's a physical 'inconvenience', they have to stay back. But in some places, women are taken as 'Lengai Douri'. They are included in the work and rituals alongside others.*” Others explained that “*Some people argue that women should be allowed to be Douris. Yes, they can be allowed, but they must be given the role of a helper to the Douri.*” These accounts suggested that ritual authority continues to be largely male-dominated, reflecting long-standing cultural beliefs regarding ritual purity and gendered responsibilities.



DISCUSSION

The findings revealed that the relationship between the Bodo and Sijou extended far beyond the plant's sacredness. Sijou functioned as a religious symbol, a cultural marker, a source of traditional knowledge, and a representation of the interconnection between people and nature. Besides the intangible relations, Sijou is also used in different material forms, such as raw material for a musical instrument and medicine, among others. Ritualistic practices related to Sijou were generally transmitted through regular teaching, learning centres and apprenticeship during festivals. However, these rituals and, broadly, Bodo-Sijou relations were found to be dynamic due to changes in socio-political and economic realities of the present times. This study investigated the dynamic nature of human-Sijou relations by moving beyond the ritualistic and cosmological aspects to contextualizing it in the social realities of the region and its people, thereby addressing the present research gap.

Human-plant relationships have increasingly been recognised within ethnobotanical and anthropological research as dynamic interactions that connect ecological knowledge, cultural values, and spiritual beliefs (Garibaldi & Turner, 2004). For Bodos, Sijou was understood as a cultural keystone species and a living representation of *Bwrai Bathou* and served as a symbol through which people connected with spirituality, identity, ancestry, and the natural world. Narratives shared by participants described Sijou as the first living plant to emerge on earth when there was only water and rock, reinforcing its position as a sacred symbol of creation and life itself. Such origin stories provided moral and spiritual explanations for the plant's sacred status and strengthened the emotional and cultural bonds between people and Sijou. Similar relationships have been documented among Indigenous communities worldwide, where particular plants and trees are regarded as ancestors, protectors, or manifestations of spiritual beings, shaping both cultural identity and environmental stewardship (Verschuuren, 2006).

For Bodos, Sijou was placed beyond the ritual significance due to its practical importance in medicine, healing practices, and the making of the *Serja* musical instrument. These findings demonstrated that the relationship between people and Sijou is simultaneously spiritual, cultural, and material, reflecting the interconnected nature of Indigenous knowledge systems. Research from the Guaranies communities of Argentina, where specific plant species are used to manufacture musical instruments employed in religious ceremonies and cultural celebrations, shows the links between plant materials and cultural identity, spirituality, and traditional knowledge (Keller, 2010). Similarly, relationships have been documented among Hindus, where the Tulsi plant (*Ocimum tenuiflorum*) and neem

plant (*Azadirachta indica*), on the one hand, is worshipped in household courtyards and associated with purity, protection, and family well-being, and on the other used as medicinal purposes, making bio-pesticides, etc. (Sharma & Pegu, 2011). Adivasi tribes in Central India regard the Sal or Karam tree (*Shorea robusta*) as the symbol of the folk deity Karam (signifying strength, youth and vitality) and also use various parts of the tree for household purposes (Murmu, 2024). In Japan, sacred trees associated with Shinto beliefs are considered dwelling places of spirits (*kami*) and are protected through ritual practices (Verschuuren, 2006). Similar to the Sijou plant, the fig tree (*Ficus spp.*) and the baobab tree (*Adansonia digitata*) are parts of both the spiritual and material world of tribes in East and West Africa (Salako et al., 2018). It is to be noted here that most examples of plants that are regarded as important cultural species are trees, whereas the Sijou is unique as it is a succulent, thorny shrub.

The Sijou plant, in Bodo lifeworld, weaves the spiritual and material world in a way that Bodos ascribe personhood and agency to the plant. It has become a symbol of Bodo identity, much like the Bodhi tree for the Buddhists (Schroer, 2024), or the vegetal ethos of the Naga communities (Swaraj & Mishra, 2024). The cultural-material continuum of Sijou finds its expression in extending the godliness by placing the plant at the most prominent part of the house, converting the eternality into a physically strong altar with bamboo fencing, turning the life-affirming qualities into ritual practices, and incorporating the important number five into fencing fastenings and hymns.

While Sijou continues to be regarded as the supreme symbol of Bathou worship, participants acknowledged that social and religious changes have influenced the ways people engage with the plant. Several respondents noted that some members of the community have adopted other religions, while others have migrated to faraway towns and cities for education, employment, and new livelihood opportunities. These changes have reduced the connection of Bodo youths to Sijou and, broadly, traditional practices and knowledge systems. Similar processes of social change have been documented in Indigenous communities, not only in Assam and India, but worldwide, where migration, formal education, and economic transformation reshape traditional systems of knowledge transmission and religious practice (Reyes-García et al., 2013). For Adivasis in Central India, their relationships to sal trees are now threatened as, on one hand, modern education and cultural homogenization through dominant festivals have reduced the importance of the local Karam festival, and on the other hand, deforestation and displacement from ancestral land due to extractive development have removed them from sal-dominated areas (Murmu, 2020; Montu, 2025).

However, rather than indicating negative change related to the significance of Sijou, our findings suggest a transformation in how knowledge and practices are being maintained among the Bodos. Cultural organizations (e.g. All Bodo Bathou Association), educational institutions (e.g. Bathou Ashram), new kinds of Bathou festivals encompassing large areas, and research activities were creating new opportunities for younger generations to learn about Bathou traditions. This supports arguments that Indigenous knowledge systems are always dynamic and adaptive when linked to identity and identity politics, continually responding to changing social circumstances while maintaining core cultural values (Gadgil et al., 1993). In this sense, the relationship between people and Sijou appeared to be adapting to contemporary circumstances rather than disappearing. Whether both knowledge and practice would remain intact or not, or whether the knowledge about Sijou would remain without the practice, could be determined through the course of time. Similar tree-based cultural revivalism has been observed across many other cultures. Adivasis of central India have mobilised themselves, and within their assertion of tribal rights, they are trying to revive Karam worship through symbolic preservation and institutional mobilisation (Montu, 2025). Several tree-covered sites across India and China are now treated as sacred zones, thereby creating a *de facto* conservation area (Huang et al., 2020). These changes point towards Bodo subjectivity formation outside the greater Assamese identity, where the spiritual-material usage of Sijou is now extending into a symbol of place-based identity assertion. Such identity politics is now creating new grounds for different communities to claim agency in political discourse. The Sarna movement among the Adivasis of India revolved around nature worship and the politics of sacred groves, and in Finland, the Finnish are now projecting the tree-lake landscape as an inseparable Finnish identity (Owain, 2011; Mäkelä & Linkola, 2024).

Earlier studies also provided limited attention to women's ritual knowledge. By including female participants and a *Doudini*, this study highlights women's role in maintaining ritual practices, knowledge transmission, and participating in spiritual traditions associated with Sijou. Participants also indicated gradual changes, with women increasingly participating in ritual activities as *Lengai Douri* and taking on supportive roles in ceremonial practices. While the position of *Douri* remains predominantly held by men, these emerging forms of participation suggested a cautious expansion of women's involvement within Bathou ritual life as *Doudinis*, household worshippers, and transmitters of cultural knowledge within families, demonstrating both continuity and adaptation in gendered religious roles.

The findings suggest that the future of Sijou-centred traditions will depend largely on the successful transmission of knowledge across generations and the pathway through which

Bodo cultural revivalism will proceed. Although participants expressed concern that migration, changing livelihoods, formal education, and religious transformation have reduced opportunities for learning through everyday family interactions, the study also found evidence of adaptation of Sijou worship, rather than decline. Many kinds of festivals such as *Bwisagw* and *Kherai* or emergence of community organisations like the All Bodo Bathou Association could be a welcome step towards making people, especially the younger generations aware of both the knowledge and practice of the Bathou tradition, and especially Sijou worship. At the same time, the declining knowledge of medicinal uses, *Serja* making, and oral narratives suggest that some forms of traditional ecological knowledge might become lost due to reduction of usage, unless actively documented, preserved and transmitted. While it is true that modern medicines or ways of making musical instruments have evolved to produce better quality products, the traditional ways were a part of the Bodo identity, which, if lost, would be irreversible. Continued reverence for the Sijou plant demonstrated how sacred species can contribute to cultural continuity and environmental stewardship. Protecting such traditions may therefore be important not only for preserving Bodo cultural heritage but also for maintaining indigenous knowledge systems that support people-nature relationships and biodiversity conservation. (Garibaldi & Turner, 2004).

This study addressed several gaps identified in earlier literature, such as providing the social context in which Sijou-related traditions are embedded. Previous studies largely focused on the symbolic and religious significance of *Bathousim* but provided limited insight into contemporary community perspectives. Through interviews and participant observation, the present study documented how knowledge of the Sijou plant continues to be transmitted through families, rituals, folklore, and community organisations. The findings highlighted the importance of examining sacred plant traditions through the lens of gender and social organisation rather than treating communities as culturally uniform. However, the study also faced certain limitations which could be overcome in future studies.

Many rituals happen across the year at different times which could not be documented due to time constraints. For example, the *Kherai* festival and associated Sijou-related rituals take place in the month of November, which was beyond the timeline of the fellowship. Therefore, research over a longer duration would be necessary to document all festivals and rituals. Importantly, unlike in earlier times, festivals like *Kherai* are not celebrated in all villages. Often, such festivals are celebrated in remote villages which are difficult to document. The study was limited to the rural areas of the Baksa district, further limiting documentation of festivals that are celebrated in only few villages. Further research is needed to shed light on how youth migration to urban centers and the rural-urban

divide is affecting their participation in community rituals and festivals. Lastly, stories related to rituals and festivals around nature worship among Bodos are already getting lost as they have not been documented at all or the knowledge holders are aging. Therefore, it is imperative to document the stories that still remain, and preserve them in different formats, print, digital, or as performance.



CONCLUSION

Our study on relations between the Bodo community and the Sijou plant shows that this relationship is multi-faceted; the plant is considered both spiritually and materially important, and it drives various aspects of Bodo religious tradition as well as catering to everyday needs. However, the significance of Sijou is dynamic and evolving in terms of religious, social, and generational changes. While many traditional practices remain active, migration and changing lifestyles may influence how future generations engage with the plant. The plant is also a key symbol in contemporary Bodo cultural revivalist practices where new forms of institutions and events are emerging.

Therefore, we conclude that studies on human-plant relations need to go beyond ritualistic aspects and see how such relations navigate social, political, economic, and ecological contexts. Documenting ritualistic and cosmological aspects around the trees is also important, especially for plants which are intricately linked to a community's identity and history. As mentioned, many stories related to Sijou have already been lost, and therefore this research will provide impetus to broaden the research horizon and query not only about plants similar to Sijou, but also about plants which are more common or endangered, wild or domestic. This knowledge can be further preserved and exhibited in different available formats (oral/ print/ online/ multimedia) with the communities with whom such studies are done. Understanding such nuanced human-plant relations through qualitative social research holds promise not only for effective documentation of nature-culture relations, but also for preservation and possibly, assertion of local indigenous people's identity.



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