



Understanding the Bodos through Tangible Heritage

SANGHAMITRA CHOUDHURY* AND JUNMANI BASUMATARY**

Introduction

Assam, the vast land of diversity beautified with its culture, tribes, resources, biodiversity, and history is the home of many ethnic tribes. Bodos are one of the largest plain tribes of Assam. They have their own culture, traditions, religions, and worldviews. They are also known as Boro or Boro-Kachari (Endle, 2010). B.H. Hodgson introduced the term “Bodo” for the first time in his book titled *Essay the First: On the Koch, Bodo and Dhimal Tribe* in three parts, published in 1847 (Hodgson, 1847). The Bodos are one of the Indo-Mongoloid tribes from North-Eastern India who speak Tibeto-Burman language stream. The Tibeto-Burman language stream also includes the Garos, Rabhas, Tiwas, Dimasas, Hajongs, Sonowals, Deuris, Boroks of Tripura, Mech of West Bengal and Nepal, and other related tribes. According to the Bodo scholars, Bodos are have migrated from the North-Western China and the time of their migration are is still up for question. The Bodo people arrived in this area considerably earlier than the Aryans, according to the scholars. They are dispersed over this area as well as the nearby countries of Bangladesh and Nepal. However, the majority of them are concentrated in Assam or in the Brahmaputra Valley. Their current districts of Kokrajhar, Chirnag, Baksa, Udalguri, Dhubri, Goalpara, Nagaon, and Morigaon are where they are largely concentrated. Despite being dispersed, they nevertheless retain their unique identity from others due to their unique language and culture.

The age-old Bodos tribe and their customs, cultural identity and belief system are preserved. However, the growth and development of Bodos has also been guaranteed by the sixth schedule of the Indian Constitution. In 2004, out of the 22 languages, Bodo is listed as one of the Official Languages in the Eight

* Sanghamitra Choudhury is a Professor in the Department of Political Science, Bodoland University, BTR, Assam and is a corresponding author.

** Junmani Basumatary is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science, Bodoland University, BTR, Assam.

Schedule of the Indian Constitution. Under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, the Territorial District Council named as Bodoland Territorial Region was created in 2020. Accordingly, the District Council comprises with of four districts- Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa, and Udalguri. The entire region has a population of about 1.5 million.

The clothing and outfits worn by the Bodos are distinctive. With an *Aronnai*, the culture's pride is first exhibited. The Bodo girl wears clothing called *Dokhona*, which is paired with a shirt and *Jwmgra*, or more often known as *Sadri*, to reflect her community. It should be noted that there are numerous varieties of *Dokhona* and *Jwmgra*, all of varying quality. The *Dokhona Thaoushi* is the name for the bridal *dokhona* which is worn by the Bodo bride during wedding ceremony. The traditional *Gamsa* used by the Bodo people serves as a symbol of their culture.



Figure 1: The vibrant Bagurumba dance of the Bodos that showcases their traditional attire *Dokhona*.

The artefacts used by the Bodo people are both numerous and sparsely distributed. Uniqueness of the Bodo culture and heritage is an attraction to many outsiders. To understand and analyse the tangible heritage of Bodos, the paper has adopted photography and interactions as a methodology to collect the data and sources. The effect of photography as an aspect of reality is felt throughout modern life. In a sense, we think and communicate photographically. The nonverbal language of photorealism is a language that

is most understood both inter and cross culturally. This fluency of recognition is the basic reason the camera can be of such importance in anthropological communication and analysis. In this regard John Collier, Jr., and Malcolm Collier in their book *Visual Anthropology: Photography as Research Method* writes:

'Photography is an abstracting process of observation but very different from the fieldworker's inscribed notebook where information is preserved in literate code. Photography also gathers selective information, but the information is specific, with qualifying and contextual relationships that are usually missing from codified written notes.....'

A large volume of photographic content is tangible. Any number of analysts can read the same elements in exactly the same manner. To be sure this takes training, but so does the reading of maps and bacteriological slide. '(John Collier, 1986).

The paper has taken Kokrajhar distinct as a study area, which is the capital of Bodoland Territorial Areas and conglomeration of both urban and rural populations. The central target of the sample area is to draw the relevant and required information for the same.

Understanding Bodos through Tangible Heritage

The Bodos adore their inherent cultural practices which are passed from generation to generation. The cultural life of the Bodo is unique in terms of custom, rituals, dress, food habits, living standard, social set up and to general life style. The culture is regarded as one which is unique, rich and multifaceted in the region. W.C. Smith in his *Monograph on Ao Naga Tribe* demarcated thirteen outstanding features of Mongoloid culture (Smith, 1925). Bodos shares at least five common characteristics or traits with Nagas tribe of neighbouring state of Assam and other Mongoloid tribes. Thus, many Bodo scholars believed and pen down especially in the Bodo literature that the Bodo culture is as old as other Mongoloid tribes, basically the ancestral home of Bodos, the Chino Tibetan or Indo-Mongoloids racial stock (Chatterjee, 1974). With passage of time some of these cultural practices appear to be extinct now, but scholars believed that the Bodos have been practising this culture from time immemorial. In claiming artistic skills of Bodos that have been associated with them, Anil Boro in his book named as *Folk Literature of The Bodos*, writes:

"The Bodos are well versed in using bamboo for different purpose like house building and handicraft. The Bodo women can prepare Zou (rice bear) from rice and weave their dreams in the loom. The eri cloth (Indi), dokhona and phali woven by them are superb

example of artistic finish in handloom. Besides these, the Bodos have a rich storehouse of the songs and dances handed down from generation to generation. The Ramnants of Maibong and Khaspur provide unique examples of Bodo-Kachari art and sculpture. The contribution of the Bodos to the art and culture of Assam is immense” (Boro, 2014 (Third Edition)).

Regarding the weaving skill of Bodo women Sydney Endle eloquently praised it in his monograph titled *The Kachari*. He describes:

It is said that a Kachari Woman, if not greatly or frequently interrupted in her work, can weave about half a yard each day; and, as this eri cloth, woven in long strips about two yards wide, can always command a ready sale at about Rs. 2/-per yard, it will be at once evident that a good worker can in this way, without neglecting other urgent domestic duties, easily make a substantial addition to the family income (Endle, The Kacharis, 1997 (Reprint)).

The Bodo community’s clothing and ornaments serve as a symbol of their traditional art and culture. It is to be believed that the women of the Bodo tribe have worn self-woven clothing since the dawn of time. In Bodo society, weaving is extremely important. Without weaving expertise, Bodo women were not treated with the respect they deserved in ancient times. It was informed that in earlier times it would be difficult to find a woman without weaving expertise. The society hardly used to accept a new daughter-in-law without weaving expertise. There are plenty of instances in the Bodo Folk songs and folk literature where Bodo women’s weaving expertise has been depicted and their fondness and love for weaving has been expressed in different situations. Here, a song sung by a sister in-law addressing her brother in-law requesting him to bring the wood from the hills to make weaving instrument; the young girl sings:

*“Hajw Khorō...Hajw Khorō
Bongfang Dannw Thangbwla
Shaal Jora...Makhu Jora
Labw Labw Gwmwi Laru Bandarw” (Boro M. R., 1995)*

i.e., Never forget to bring *Shaal Jora* when you go to the hills to collect wood, dear brother-in-law. Please offer me a pair of *Makhu Jora* (weaving tool).

In the next song mother-in-law sings addressing to her would be daughter-in-law:

*Nanga Hai Angnw Nangthara
Ji Danw Rwnngwi*

Agor Ernzw Rwnngwi Baohari. (Boro R. , 2018)

i.e. I don't need a daughter-in-law who doesn't know how to weave or who doesn't have the skill to weave.

Thus, the weaving skills of the Bodos has been attested to in both, Bodo folk literature and songs. Bodo customary law is strict because of the Bodo people. The practice of customary law among the Bodos has changed somewhat as a result of modernisation, but it is still largely observed during rites, celebrations, and especially in distant settlements, where the wearing of traditional clothing, dance, and artefacts is a requirement and serves to reflect culture and tradition as a whole.

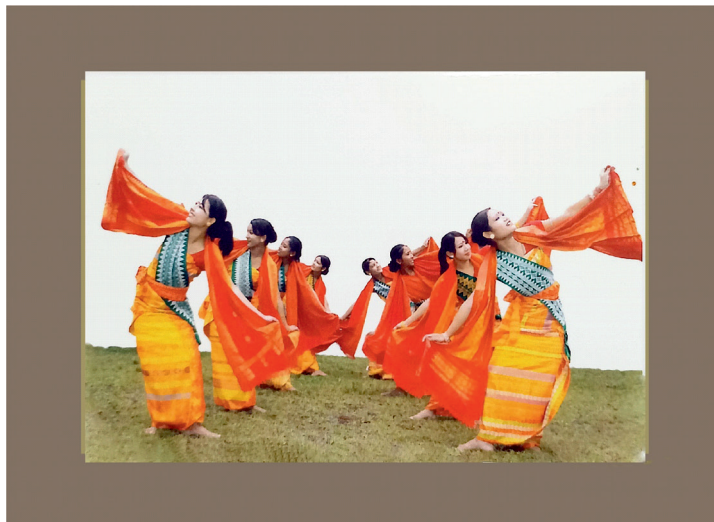


Figure 2: Warm sunshine: weaving a story for generations.

The secret to the Bodos' success in achieving their goals for the community has always been their spirit of struggle. The society, like all communities, is patriarchal in nature, yet Bodo women play a significant role in social, economic, cultural, and festival activities. The women in Bodo community are self-sufficient. In the past, weaving was a significant source of income for women, but with the rise of modernity, weaving has lost much of its significance. The rivalry brought on by modernism and industrialisation has reduced the output of traditional weaving, but it has also enabled Bodo women to advance in various sectors. Bodo women are now moving towards occupations in the public and commercial sectors in order to earn profits. Many of them have transitioned to market-based income streams including selling vegetables and

other products, traditional clothing, and medicinal herbs in order to survive. Bodos and Bodo women share a deep affinity for their traditional clothing and way of life. During various ceremonies, there are some pictures of people wearing their traditional clothing.



Figure 3: Bodo women working in the paddy fields.



Figure 4: Fishing for a livelihood



Figure 5: Bodo women dancing

Weaving A Story

Aronnai -A muffler kind of stole

The Bodo people's *Aronnai* are a stunning and vibrant piece of clothing. In the past, Bodo warriors wore belts made by their wives, mothers, or sisters called *Aronnai* on the battlefield. According to a belief, *Aronnai* must be braided during the night, which represents a favourable omen for soldiers. Bodo people currently wear it in a variety of ways according to the occasion and ceremonies.

The Bodos are a tribe with a rich cultural heritage, and the society has several traditional dances. During the *Bathou* rituals, such as the *Kherai* festivals, some dances are done. Through *Bagurumba*, *Daoshri Delai*, and other cultural manifestations, several dances are included. *Aronnai* is a crucial costume that both male and female dancers must wear in all dance styles. It is hung from one shoulder and fastened at the waist with another *Aronnai* around both edges.

It is simply hung around the neck during social occasions and when someone is being honoured or congratulated. Without the delicate floral motif in the middle and the "*Hajw Agor*" (hill motif) on the edges, the fabric would not be referred to as *Aronnai*. "*Agor*" is the name for the major motif design utilised in *Aronnai* in Bodo. *Bandhuram Agor* is one of the oldest designs or patterns.



Figure 6: Yellow *Arronna*; *Arronnai* can be woven in different colour. Here in the picture yellow and peacock green are shown.



Figure 7: This picture of *Arronnai* has been taken from the common household of Bodo Family from Kokrajhar, Assam, India.

***Dokhona*: A Unique Bodo Traditional Attire**

Dokhona is the main traditional attire worn by Bodo women. *Dokhona* means having six angles ('Do' means six, 'Khona' means angle). It creates six angles while wearing. Its length is 2.5 meters to 3 meters and its width is 1.5 meters.

It is worn to cover the whole body from chest to ankle and tied one round at a time in the waist. Different colours and design patterns are found in *Dokhona*. *Dokhona* has many variants, viz., 'Matha' 'Salmatha' 'Bidon'. These are plain *Dokhona* and worn during summer and religious festivals and rituals. Yellow is the most adored and traditional colour. Yellow colour with an ethnic pattern called 'Agor Gubwi', 'Matha' is used as a bridal attire. Next to yellow, green is very popular followed by red, orange, violet, purple, and blue. Different motifs designed (woven) by Bodo women are basically inspired by nature, birds, and animals. The following are the most popular motifs of *Dokhona*:

- (a) *Agor Gubwi* (Original and oldest motif)
- (b) *Phareo Megon* (Pigeon eye)
- (c) *Daoraimwkhreb* (Winkle of peacock)
- (d) *Daosamwkhreb* (Winkle of chicken)
- (e) *Maoji Agan* (Foot print of cat)
- (f) *Thaigirbibar* (Flower of elephant plant)
- (g) *Dinkhia Agor* (Motifs of fern/ fern pattern)
- (h) *Hajw Agor* (Hill pattern)
- (i) *Rege Regang* (Ethnic Motif)
- (j) *Daothu Godo* (Pigeon Neck)
- (k) *Bidon Maidi Dokhona/Sala Matha Dokhona* (Plain Pattern *Dokhona*)



Figure 8: In the picture this is *Phareo Megon Dokhona*. An attire for women. The base colour of this *Dokhona* is usually in yellow colour. The *Dokhona* picture has been taken from the old lady from Kokrajhar, Assam, India.

Indi Dokhona (Bodo Silk Dokhona)

Among the Bodos, *Indi* is one of the priciest and most expensive fabrics. Bodo silk is another name for *Indi*. It is made from silk worms that Bodo women raise. In their homes, the Bodo women spin the cocoon into *Indi* thread or yarn. One of the unusual customs that Bodo people really adore is this one. When it's cold outside, people wear the *Indiji* to keep warm. However, *Indi* is still used today in both *Dokhona* and highlighted stoles with traditional Bodo patterns. Some of them weave *Indi* using contemporary technologies. *Indi* materials are expensive since the production process takes a long time (high labour cost).



Figure 9: *Indi Dokhona* is modern version of *Dokhona* weaved and adorned by Bodo Women in especial occasion like- wedding and formal gatherings. The *Dokhona* is way costlier in comparison to usual *Dokhona*. The interesting part of this *Indi Dokhona* is the fabric processed from locally rearing silk worm. The picture of this *Dokhona* is taken from one employed Bodo women from Kokrajhar Town.

Dokhona Thaosi

The *Dokhona Thaosi* is the community's primary and most adorned garment worn by women folk. Throughout the wedding ceremony, the bride wears it. This *Dokhona* has been stained red with *Agor* (motif). Green, white, blue, red, and yellow dyes are used on both border pieces. These days, this kind of *Dokhona* is uncommon and difficult to locate. With the passage of time and intervention of global market nowadays Bodo brides are seen wearing more modern and intricated modern design like- silk material, beads and stone

studded, motif of zari or rolex threads, etc. Moreover, in most of the remote villages *Dokhona Thoasi* is still in use for bridal wear amongst the community (Brahma, 1989). Recently it has been seen wearing by Bodo women in other casual occasions apart from wedding purposes. The recent development has is marked as awakening of *Dokhona Thoasi* amongst the generation.



Figure 10: The name of this Dokhona is *Thoasi*, an attire specially worn by Bodo Brides in earlier days. The picture of this Dokhona has been taken from a lady from Kokrajhar, Assam, India.

Jwmgra/ Fali/ Fashra (Stole)

Bodo women cover the upper part of their bodies with *Jwmgra*, *Fali*, or *Fashra* when wearing *Dokhona*. A set of clothing is called *Dokhona* and *Jwmgra*. *Jwmgra* has a 2 to 2.5 metre length and a half metre in width. In general, *Jwmgra Agor* differs from *Dokhona* and occupies a sizable portion of the *Jwmgra*. A common motif of a *Jwmgra* is the *Hajw Agor* (a pattern resembling hills), and this *Jwmgra* with *Hajw Agor* is worn on important occasions, such as wedding ceremonies and festivals. *Jwmgra* comes in a variety of colours, but the three most prevalent ones are red, green and yellow. Apart from that *Indi Jwmgra* (Bodo silk stole), warm stole with larger wide woven with *Indi* (Bodo Silk) are most common stoles in every Bodo family. The warm stoles known as *Indi ji Gudung* are used by both male and female. Male usually wear plain stoles.



Figure 11: Bodo Traditonal *Arronnai Jwmgra*



Figure 12: Bodo Silk *Indi Jwmgra*



Figure 13: Indi Gudung ji *Jwmgra* (Bodo Silk Warm Stole)

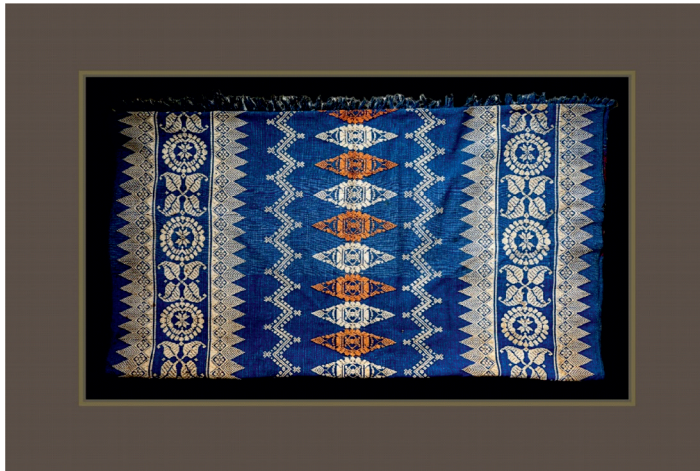


Figure 14: These are stoles with age old traditional Bodo motif. These motifs are also known as *Arronnai Agor*, *Bibar Agor*, *Arronnai Agor Indi* usually weaved in stoles.

Khwmaniarw Gwdwanigangra- Fulkori, JinjiriFulkori, Kheru, Khwmani Khera (Earrings and Necklace)

These are the jewellery and ornaments worn by Bodo women. Gold makes up the majority of them. The earring's main body is 1 cm long and straight, while its centre edge features a floral pattern. Some *Fulkori* earrings have a chain so they can be worn around the ears like an ear cuff. Necklace made of gold and silver is usually worn by Bodo Women. *Chandra haar* is one such old necklace design worn by Bodo women.



Figure 15: This picture has been taken from a woman from a local village called Tiniali, Kokrajhar, Assam, India. The earring set is known as *Fulkori* and popularly adorned and loved by the Bodo women. It is still popularly used among the older Women of Bodo Society.

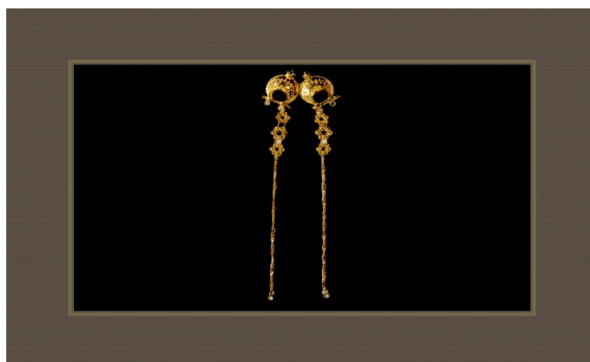


Figure 16: *Jinjiri Fulkori* is an extended design of previous version of earring. The earring is usually made of gold. The picture of this earring set has been taken from the household of middle-aged Bodo women in Kokrajhar town, Assam, India.



Figure 17: The neck piece is known as Chandra Haar. The owner of this neckpiece has said it is not exact design of Chandra Haar but pattern has inspired and half copied from the original version of neckpiece. Picture has been taken from a lady from Kokrajhar.



Figure 18: Nosepin called *Nakhaphool* or *Nakhi* in Bodo. This is worn on the ala of nose either on the left or the right side of the nose. Usually, Bodo women wear nose pin on the left side. There is variety design of design. Earlier Bodo women used to wear nostril ring known as *Nolod*.

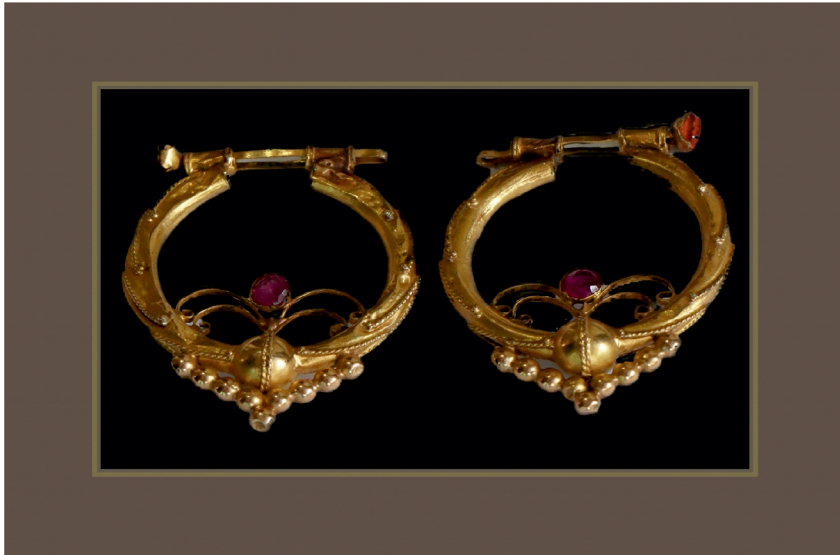


Figure 19: The earring usually wears worn by Bodo Women.



Figure 20: This earring is called *Khera* in Bodo. This earring set is very commonly worn by Bodo women, girls and teenagers.

Owani Khanjong (Bamboo Comb):

Owani Khanjong (Bamboo Comb) is used was by Bodo people at a time when modern commercial combs were not available. The use of this particular form is very rare at present.



Figure 21: Bamboo comb made of Bamboo used by Bodo women in ancient times. It is not in use in present time by Bodo women though. It is kept by a local fellow in an abandoned form.

Serja and Dahal-Thungri

Sherja is a musical instrument, while *Dahal-Thungri* is a dance instrument. Together, they are known as *Sherja* (looks like a violin). Due to the inclusion of *Dahal-Thungri* (Sword and Shield) in the dance, *Dahal Thungri* is even recognised as the *Kherai* dance form. The *Dahal* is a black-coated shield with five white circles painted on the metal's exterior and a holder in the interior. The sword, known as a *Thungri*, is constructed of iron metal and has a wooden handle. The *Dahal Thungri* dance demonstrates how to defend oneself from adversaries while engaged in combat. *Sherja* is made of wood that has been harvested from the environment. In Bodo musical instruments, the *Sherja* is a violin-like instrument. *Sherja* gives the traditional melodies and it is played especially in *Bagurumba* dance form. It is a string instrument that is played using the fingers of the right hand and a device that is made of a horse tail and bow with bamboo. The structures of the *Sherja* are known as *Khunti*, which is the upper part, *Dirung*, which is made of string, *Dongphang*, which is the body of the *Sherja* and is known as *Dongphang* in Bodo, *Ringkhang Gudung*, which are the holes through which the *Sherja's* melodic sound is released, and *Gorai*, which is the lowest part and made of horse tail material. The construction of bow that is used in playing *Sherja* is built and named as *Bwrla* which is formed of bamboo and *Gorai Lanjai* taken from horse tail. These tools portray the Bodos' social structure and the customs around with they use of natural extracts to make them.



Figure 22: The photograph contains two instruments called *Serja* (Violin look-alike) a Bodo musical instrument and *Dahal-Thungri* (Shield and Sword) especially used in one of Bodo dance form.

Conclusion

One of the major tribal communities in Assam, the Bodos are of Mongolian descent and have a strong connection to nature in their beliefs and traditions. Their extensive use of nature is evident in their clothing, such as the *Dokhona*, musical instruments, such as the *Sherja*, *Sifung*, and *Jotha*, dance instruments, such as the *Dahal-Thungri*, and the ornamental patterns used by Bodo women. Tusser silk, pat silk, and cotton yarns are some of the special natural raw materials used to make *Dokhona*. Bodo women also engage in the activity of rearing the silk worm locally called *Indi Emphow* and *Muga Emphow* (Silk worm), which are used in the production of *Indi Khundwng* (Silk Yarn). Bodo *Dokhona* is typically yellow, but different colours collected from nature are used to dye it in order to produce variations in colour and to make it look more beautiful. Jackfruit wood (*Atrocarpusintigrifolia*), *Khambrenga* trees (*Averrhoa carambola*), and *Haldwi* (turmeric) are used to make yellow colour dyes. *Khanthokra* (*Symplocosspicta*), *Thaika* (*Garcinia pendeculata*), and the bark of the *Khwirw* (*Acacia Catechu*) tree are used. For the green colour, seed and shell of *Bon Bwrwndw* (*cratevareligiosa*), *Shelekha Phithai* (*Terminalia Chubela*) and Gum tree leaf (*Strobilanthes Flacidifoliys*) are used. Bark from the *Khwirw* (*Acacia catechu*), *Thaisuhri* (*Amara Rohitukine*), and *Jam* (*Eugenia Jambolan*) trees and leaves of *Odal* tree (*Sterculiacolorata*) are used for brown colour. Fruits of the *Khambrenga* tree (*Averrhoa Carambola*), *Bon Bwrwndw* seeds (*Cratevareligiosa*), and Gum leaves (*Strobilanthes Flacidifoliys*) are used to make blue colour. For

colour orange, (Marinda Angustifolia) tree wood, (Garcinia Xanthochymus) tree bark, *Nahor* (Musseafera) tree flower, and *Shindur Phithai* (Bixa Orellana) tree seeds are utilised.

In the past, the Bodo *Dokhona* designs such as *Agorgubwi*, *Hajw Agor* (mountain design), *Daorai Mwxhreb* (peacock winkle), *Phareow Megon* (Pegion eye), *Bwigri Bibar* (Jujube Flower), and *Thaigir Bibar Agor* (Elephant-apple flower) were frequently observed to be woven. The ornaments worn by Bodo women include a floral and leafy pattern that represents the beauty that nature creates. The Bodos' musical instruments, such as the *Serja Sifung* and *Jotha*, are all made of wood, an extract of nature that aptly emphasises their way of life in a natural setting. Dance instruments like the *Dahal-Thungri*, which are constructed of metal and have a wooden grip and are taken from nature. As tribal people, the Bodos have a strong bond with nature because it is present in most all aspects of their daily lives.

The captured photos of tangible heritage of Bodo society through the photography represents a significant acceleration in the possibility that communication itself can become more visual and very close to a conversation that is entirely without voice or text. The photographs of Bodo people are clearly reminiscent of the culture and heritage that are have developed over the time. Thus, through the photography we can understand how it is traditional and tangible heritage values are reinforced in Bodo society.

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