

Kherai as a Form of Communication within the Bodo Community in India

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Received	Accepted	Published
20.09.2025	26.11.2025	30.11.2025

<https://doi.org/10.61275/ISVSej-2025-12-06-01>

Abstract

Kherai is an artform among the Bodo people of India serving also as a sacred space for the worship of Bwrai Bathou, the supreme deity. Indeed, it is a vibrant form of Folk Performing Art rooted in the religious and cultural traditions of the Bodo community. Indeed, it acts as a crucial medium for communication within their society. In this context, this paper delves into the multifaceted significance of the art.

This research employs a comprehensive examination of the rituals, music, dance, and other artistic elements associated with Kherai within a qualitative research methodology. It used observations conducted in Lechera village of Assam within the Baksa District. Primary data were gathered through a combination of interviews and observations, capturing the perspectives and practices associated with Kherai within the Bodo community. The qualitative nature of the study allowed for an in-depth examination of the cultural and religious significance of Kherai.

A descriptive analysis was employed to assess and interpret the data collected, providing a subtle understanding of the role of Kherai as a form of communication. It unravels the intricate ways in which the artform facilitates the transmission of religious beliefs, cultural values, and communal identity. By exploring the symbiotic relationship between the sacred space and the performing art, it highlights the role of the Kherai as a dynamic and living expression of the spiritual and cultural heritage of the Bodo people. Moreover, the paper discusses the implications of Kherai as a form of communication, shedding light on its potential to foster social cohesion, preserve tradition, and contribute to the rich tapestry of the collective consciousness of the Bodo community.

It concludes that Kherai is an important form of Bodo folk performing art that communicates the religious and cultural traditions of the Bodo people. Through its use of music, dance, and other artistic elements, Kherai creates a sense of community and cultural identity among the Bodo people. Its highly structured and symbolic nature reflects the deep connection between the Bodo people and their natural environment.

Key words: Folk Performing Art, Communication, Traditional Media, Bodo, Kherai, India.

Introduction

Bodo people are an indigenous community residing in the northeastern region of India as a unique ethnic group speaking Tibeto-Burman languages, they live mainly in the northeastern Indian states of Assam and Meghalaya, as well as in Bangladesh and Nepal. In Assam, they are the largest minority group. Most of them are found in the northern areas of the Brahmaputra River valley.

They possess a rich cultural heritage that finds vibrant expressions in their traditional art forms. Among these art forms, Bodo folk performing art stands out as a captivating medium of communication, entertainment, and cultural preservation. This art spans a wide variety of dance, song, and theatre styles. The artistic expressions have been vital to the development of Bodo identity and the revitalization of Bodo culture for centuries, and they continue to play an important role in these endeavours today.

Communication is an act of conveying messages from one person to another. Traditional media is a very useful form of communication. It has many forms. It is known by different names in different parts of country. They develop different way of communication depending on the local languages and cultures. Folk media is an effective means of communication in the world, since it not only connects people with their culture but revives the lost culture of the society. Folk media forms the language of expression of local people and also gives chance to voice out their opinions on various issues. In general, traditional folk media is an excellent tool to enhance communication and promote dialogues at the grass root level of any society.

Kherai is one such form of Religious Folk Performing Art of the Bodos of Assam. It is a deeply spiritual and cultural practice that reflects the close relationship between the Bodo people and their natural environment. It is an important part of Bodo religious and cultural traditions, and serves as a focal point for the community to come together to worship, celebrate, and honour their ancestors and deities.

According to an informant Pratap Muchahary, Age 60, Lechera, Baksa, the creation of Kherai typically involves selecting a suitable location for the sacred space, which is often a natural setting such as a grove of trees. The location is then marked out with bamboo poles or stones to demarcate the boundary of the sacred space. Once the boundary of Kherai has been marked out, a series of rituals are performed to consecrate the space and invoke the blessings of Bwrai Bathou (God of the Bodos). These rituals include the offering of prayers, the lighting of lamps on a water gourd, as well as the sacrifice of animals such as goats and chickens. The animal sacrifice is an important part of the ritual and is seen as a way of appeasing the spirits and invoking their blessings.

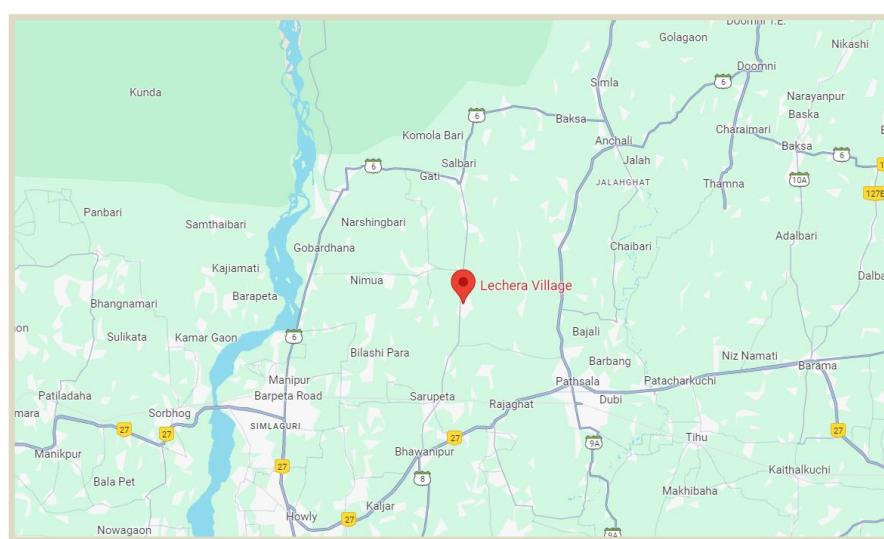


Fig. 1: Location of Lechera Village
Source: Google Maps

The aim of this study is to explore the cultural and communicative dimensions of Kherai within the Bodo society. The objectives of the study are as follows.

- To examine the role of Kherai as a form of communication within the Bodo community.
- To investigate the impact of Kherai on social cohesion and community identity among the Bodo people.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this research is grounded in several key concepts and theories that provide a comprehensive understanding of the cultural, religious, and communicative dimensions of Kherai. Among them, Cultural Performance Theory stands out.

Cultural Performance Theory: Milton Singer (1972) says that he could understand the operation of these beliefs, and their role in resisting or negotiating change, by watching religious ceremonies, which he categorized as 'cultural performances'. Kherai, as a performative event, serves as a platform where the Bodo people engage in collective self-reflection and cultural expression, reinforcing their communal identity and values.

Ritual Theory: Ritual theory, particularly the works of Catherine Bell (1992) offers insights into the ritualistic aspects of Kherai. Rituals are seen as formalized, repetitive actions that convey deep symbolic meanings and reinforce social cohesion. In the context of Kherai, the rituals involved, including prayer offerings, animal sacrifices, and ceremonial dances, serve to invoke the blessings of Bwrai Bathou and strengthen the spiritual bonds of the community.

Communicative Action Theory: Jurgen Habermas' (1984) communicative action theory is pertinent to understanding Kherai as a mode of communication. This theory suggests that communication is not merely the transmission of information but a means of achieving mutual understanding and social integration. Kherai functions as a communicative act where the Bodo community conveys cultural values, religious beliefs, and social norms through symbolic language, music, dance, and other performative elements.

Symbolic Interactionism: Symbolic interactionism, as articulated by George Herbert Mead (2001), emphasizes the role of symbols and meanings in social interactions. Kherai is full of symbolic elements—such as the use of specific musical instruments, ritual objects, and dance movements—that carry significant meanings within the Bodo culture. Understanding these symbols and their interpretations by the community members is crucial for comprehending the communicative efficacy of Kherai.

Review of Literature

Stavrianopoulou (2006) says

"The analysis of the dynamic nature of rituals has become a heuristic tool for the investigation not only of religious behaviour and beliefs, but also for the study of social practice and communication in ancient and modern societies. From public assembly gatherings and funerals to celebration of cult feasts or the honouring of individuals, rituals mark socially important occasions, define beginnings and endings, and aid social transitions. Thus, rituals carry all kinds of messages intended to support and express the performance of those involved, and to create the desired results."

Claassen (2015) offers nondogmatic interpretations of rituals and beliefs in Archaic America. In compiling a wealth of detailed entries, Claassen has created both an exhaustive reference as well as an opening into new archaeological taxonomies, connections, and understandings of Native American culture. In the Indian context, scholars like Bhattacharya (2009) wrote,

"The worship of Bathow (Shiva) and the erection of the alter of this Supreme Deity (Bathow) with the sизу plant in their courtyard are noteworthy features

of rural life. In addition to the domestic worship of Bathow in the courtyard, there is the common place of worship for the community as a whole."

In fact, literature suggests that traditional rituals are not only a form of communication but also a reflection of the cultural values and beliefs of a society. By studying these rituals, we can gain a deeper understanding of how communication shapes cultural practices and how these practices, in turn, shape social relationships and identities.

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach, focusing on in-depth interviews and observations to explore the cultural and communicative dimensions of Kherai within the Bodo society. The research was conducted in Lechera village of Assam, within the Baksa District, which is known for its rich cultural heritage and strong adherence to traditional practices.

Sampling and Participant Selection: Purposeful sampling was employed, targeting individuals who were actively involved in or knowledgeable about the Kherai ritual. The key informants, such as community leaders, ritual performers, and elders, were identified and approached for interviews. The selection criteria ensured that participants had first-hand experience and expertise related to Kherai, allowing for a rich and detailed exploration of the subject.

Data Collection: Data collection was conducted primarily through semi-structured interviews and participant observations. The interviews were conducted in the local language, Bodo, to ensure clear communication and understanding.

In addition to the interviews, participant observations were conducted during the Kherai rituals and related events. The researcher actively participated in the rituals, observing and documenting the various elements of the ritual, including music, dance, and ritualistic practices. These observations provided a first-hand experience of the ritual and complemented the interview data, adding depth and context to the findings.

Findings

Kherai as a Form of Communication within the Bodo society

It was discovered that the Bodo community has been practicing Bathouism for generations, venerating Bwrai Bathou as their primary deity. Among the traditions of this faith, the Bodos who adhere to Bathouism observe the Kherai Puja. According to Swmla Daimary, Age 67, Occupation Priest, Lechera, Baksa (Informant) the Kherai celebration in Lechera village is more than 100 years old.

Kherai Puja is believed to be the greatest religious festival of the Bodos. Kherai serves as a profound means of communication within the Bodo society. The elaborate setup, from the venue under a tree or makeshift tent adorned with plantain leaves to the utilization of specific musical instruments like Kham (Drum One Pair), Jotha (Cymbal One Pair), and Sifung (a long flute made of bamboo), reflects a carefully orchestrated communication medium.



Fig. 2: Dwosari at the feet of Bathou Altar

Source: Author

The very essence of Kherai lies in its role as a religious dance form. There are mainly eighteen types of dances associated with Kherai puja. The “Dwosari”, though not a conventional dancer in the traditional sense, assumes a significant role chosen by the gods. This divine selection implies a sacred communication channel between the spiritual realm and the earthly community. The Dwosari becomes a vessel through which messages are conveyed to the people, transcending mere entertainment and reaching into the realm of spiritual dialogue.

The use of musical instruments such as Kham, Jotha, and Sifung adds a layer of auditory communication to the performance. This music is accompanied by the chanting of hymns and prayers in the Bodo language. Each beat, rhythm, and melody contribute to the overall message, creating a multisensory experience for the viewers. The Dwosari, and other performers synchronize their movements with the musical cadence, enhancing the communicative power of the dance.

The duration and endurance required for Kherai further emphasize its significance as a means of communication. The overnight performances imply a commitment of time and energy from both the performers and the audience. This prolonged engagement allows for a thorough communication of messages, often associated with the harvest, reflecting the cyclical nature of life and the importance of agricultural practices in the community.

The presence of other performers alongside the main Dwosari introduces a collaborative aspect to the communication process. These secondary performers, while maintaining a distance, contribute to the overall narrative, adding layers of meaning and nuance to the messages being conveyed. Their synchronized movements and interactions with the main performer enrich the communicative experience, making Kherai a collective endeavour.

The viewers, who religiously watch the dance, become active participants in the communication process. Their role is not passive; instead, they interpret the symbolic language of the dance, extracting messages embedded in the intricate movements, gestures, and expressions of the performers. The shared experience among the audience members creates a sense of community and reinforces the cultural and spiritual bonds within the society.



Fig. 3: Scene of Kherai Puja

Source: Author

The Kherai Altar serves as a physical platform for the communication to unfold. It symbolizes a sacred space where the earthly and divine realms converge, amplifying the significance of the messages being transmitted. The altar becomes a focal point, a visual representation of the sacred dialogue occurring through the dance.

Kherai emerges as a rich and multifaceted means of communication within the Bodo society. From its religious underpinnings to the intricate coordination of music, dance, and ritualistic elements, Kherai transcends mere entertainment and transforms into a sacred language through which the community communicates with the divine, expresses cultural narratives, and strengthens the social bonds.

The dance movements of the Kherai are highly ritualized and symbolic, with each movement representing a particular aspect of the religious and cultural traditions of the Bodo community. Here is what some of the movement depicts:

Bathou Gidingnai: To honor Bathou, the Bodo deity, the Dwosari dances gently around the altar to drums, flute, and cymbals.

Khwijwma Phonai: This war dance shows warriors' force and prowess by destroying opponents.

Khopri Sipnai: A war dance in which the Dwosari wields a sword and shield to defend and fight.

Gandoula Bwnnai: This dance shows tactical and strategic combat techniques for capturing the adversary.

Sotrali: The Dwosari dances with a sword and shield to honor Rwnswndri, the war goddess, and warrior spirit.



Fig. 4: Dwosari performing the dance accompanied by other dancers

Source: Author

The visual elements of the Kherai include the use of decorative elements such as bamboo poles, flowers, and other sacred objects. These elements are used to demarcate the sacred space of Kherai and to create a sense of ritual and reverence for the space.

Findings from the Interviews

According to Sogen Swargiary, Age 80, Lechera, Baksa (Informant):

"Kherai is not just a religious ritual; it is a way of life for us. It brings the community together and reminds us of our roots. The music, the dances, the altar—they all symbolize different aspects of our culture and our reverence for nature."

Through songs and chants that are integral to the performance, verbal communication is established. These songs often tell stories, invoke deities, and convey cultural narratives that are central to the Bodo heritage. Through these lyrics, performers communicate historical events, moral lessons, and religious beliefs.

Prayers and invocations to Bwrai Bathou which are verbal expressions are directed towards the deity, seeking blessings and guidance. They also serve to focus on the participants' minds on the sacred nature of the event.

The non-verbal communication which in this case is the dances performed during Kherai are rich in symbolic meanings. Each movement and gesture convey specific messages,

such as invoking the presence of spirits, depicting agricultural practices, or illustrating myths and legends. The choreography serves as a non-verbal language that communicates complex ideas and emotions.

Various objects used in the Kherai ritual represent symbolic communication, such as the altar, sacrificial items, and ceremonial tools. In fact, they hold deep symbolic significance. The traditional attire worn by the performers and the props used in the dances are symbolic. They often represent historical figures, deities, or natural elements, thus communicating cultural stories and heritage.

The rhythms of the drums and other instruments are not random but follow specific patterns that correspond to different parts of the ritual. These patterns communicate the progression of the ceremony and guide the performers and participants through the various stages.

Social Communication or Community Interaction take place before and after the Kherai ritual. Community members engage in discussions about the event, share personal stories, and reinforce the social bonds. This informal communication helps to strengthen community ties and ensures the transmission of cultural knowledge across generations.

Conclusion

The Kherai dance, as examined in this study, is a profoundly significant cultural and religious practice within the Bodo community of Assam. Highly ritualized and symbolic movements communicate the religious, cultural, and social standards of the community. The selection and consecration of the sacred space, the intricate dance movements, and the use of symbolic objects and musical instruments help us understand how this traditional folk media communicates.

Research shows that Kherai is a Bodo lifestyle, not just a religious ceremony. It unites people, reminds them of their beginnings, and promotes cultural narratives and community. From lyrical chants and prayers to symbolic gestures and ritualistic procedures, the Kherai dance weaves a rich tapestry of meanings that connect strongly within the Bodo culture.

In the rhythmic beats of the drum, the melodious notes of the flute, and the graceful movements of the performers, Kherai transcends the realm of mere artistic expression. It becomes a communal experience, a shared journey through the intricate layers of Bodo heritage. The music resonates through the hearts of the Bodo people, stirring a collective sense of belonging and cultural identity.

The structured choreography of Kherai, with its symbolic dance movements, shows how meticulously age-old customs are preserved. Every action, facial expression, and ceremonial practice serves as a vibrant depiction of the narratives and convictions that have been transmitted across generations. Kherai thus acquires the qualities of a living archive that connects the past and the present, serving as a repository of cultural knowledge.

It is thus concluded that Kherai is an important form of Bodo folk performing art that communicates the religious and cultural traditions of the Bodo people. Through its use of music, dance, and other artistic elements, Kherai creates a sense of community and cultural identity among the Bodo people. Its highly structured and symbolic nature reflects the deep connection between the Bodo people and their natural environment.

Despite these findings, this study has limitations. First of all, it is a single case study and such findings cannot be generalized although the insights are helpful in understanding Kherai and the culture of people: especially their communications through artforms.

It is recommended that more research is conducted examining the various nuances of meanings of these communications and how they manifest in the contemporary modern world. More critically, it is necessary to research into how the cultural practices are undergoing change and what can be done to sustain them in the longer term to enrich the future generations.

Acknowledgments

The authors thanks the people of the Kheri community in coming forward to provide information which enabled this research. It did not receive any external funding. However, the authors acknowledge the support received from the Department of Folklore Research, Gauhati University, Guwahati, India, and the Pragjyotishpur University, Chandrapur, Guwahati Assam, India for their encouragement and support.a

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

Ethical Research Practice: Data employed in this research has been generated by employing ethically appropriate means.

Availability of Data: This research uses unique data obtained from the Bodo people as a specific vernacular settlement in India. Not all the data have been presented. They are available for scrutiny if and when it is necessary to examine them.

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