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From Forest to Feast: Ethnobotanical Wisdom and Culinary Ecology in Bodo Food Traditions of Northeast India

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the intricate relationship between ethnobotanical knowledge and culinary practices among the Bodo community of Assam, India. Drawing on extensive fieldwork and primary ethnographic data from Maneswar Baro's doctoral research, the study reveals how over 100 wild and semi-domesticated plant species—ranging from Dingkhia (fiddlehead fern) to Mwitha (roselle) and Narzi (dried jute leaves)—are integrated into daily diets not merely as sustenance but as carriers of medicinal, ritual, and ecological intelligence. The Bodo food system exemplifies a form of "culinary ecology," wherein seasonal foraging, biodiversity conservation, and intergenerational knowledge transmission converge.

This article analyzes the taxonomic, functional, and symbolic dimensions of Bodo food plants, highlighting their roles in health maintenance (e.g., liver detoxification, postpartum recovery), ritual observances (e.g., Bwisagu New Year), and community identity. Critically, the paper argues that such food-based traditional knowledge constitutes a living archive of biocultural heritage now threatened by agricultural homogenization and dietary globalization. The study advocates for community-led ethnobotanical documentation and the integration of Indigenous food wisdom into public health and sustainable development frameworks.

Keywords: Bodo cuisine, ethnobotany, traditional ecological knowledge, food as medicine, Northeast India, culinary ecology, biocultural diversity

INTRODUCTION

Food is far more than caloric intake; it is a repository of memory, identity, and ecological reciprocity. Among Indigenous communities, food systems often function as dynamic knowledge networks that encode generations of observation, experimentation, and adaptation to local environments. In Northeast India—a global biodiversity hotspot and home to over 200 distinct ethnic groups—the Bodo people of Assam exemplify such a food culture, where wild edibles, ritualized preparation, and medicinal applications converge in daily practice.

The Bodos, one of the largest Plains tribes of Northeast India, inhabit the Brahmaputra Valley and surrounding foothills, a region characterized by rich alluvial soils, monsoon-fed wetlands, and dense secondary forests. Their food habits, as documented in Maneswar Baro's 2021 Ph.D. thesis A Study on Food Habits and Traditional Knowledge System of the Bodos, reveal a sophisticated ethnobotanical repertoire that includes more than 100 edible plant species—many of which are foraged, not cultivated. This paper argues that the Bodo food system constitutes a form of culinary ecology: a knowledge-practice complex that links dietary choices to seasonal rhythms, ecological stewardship, and cultural continuity.

While global food systems increasingly rely on monocultures and processed commodities, Indigenous foodways like those of the Bodos offer alternative models rooted in diversity, resilience, and place-based wisdom. Yet, as Baro's research underscores, this knowledge is rapidly eroding due to urbanization, market integration, and the decline of intergenerational transmission. This article thus seeks not only to document Bodo ethnobotanical knowledge but also to position it within broader discourses on biocultural conservation, food sovereignty, and planetary health.

METHODOLOGY

This study is grounded in ethnographic data collected by Maneswar Baro between 2013 and 2020 across Bodo-dominated districts of Assam, including Baksa, Chirang, Kokrajhar, and Udalguri. Fieldwork employed folkloristic and anthropological methods, including participant observation, semi-structured interviews with 74 key informants (predominantly women aged 40–102), and documentation of food preparation during rituals, festivals, and daily meals.

Baro's approach aligns with the "folkloristics of material culture" (Dorson, 1972), treating food as a cultural text embedded with symbolic, medicinal, and ecological meanings. Plant identification was cross-verified using local nomenclature, informant descriptions, and reference to regional botanical databases (e.g., assamplants.com). This paper synthesizes and reinterprets Baro's findings through the theoretical lenses of ethnobotany (Cotton, 1996), traditional ecological knowledge (Berkes, 1993), and culinary ecology (Nabhan, 2013).

3. The Bodo Foodscape: A Taxonomy of Wild and Cultivated Edibles

The Bodo diet is remarkably diverse, integrating cultivated staples (e.g., rice, mustard, maize) with a vast array of wild-harvested greens, tubers, flowers, fungi, and fruits. Baro documents over 100 edible plant species, many with multiple uses. Below are representative examples:

Dingkhia mwigong (Diplazium esculentum): A fiddlehead fern consumed only after the Bwisagu New Year, following ritual offerings to deities. Believed to be unsafe in winter due to snake eggs in roots (Baro, 2021, p. 42).

Mwitha (Hibiscus sabdariffa): Roselle leaves used in sour curries with fish or pork. Different varieties—Mwitha gwja (deep red), Mwitha bangal (bitter), Mwitha fathw (jute-derived)—serve distinct culinary and medicinal purposes (p. 58).

Narzi (dried jute leaves, Corchorus olitorius): A bitter green central to death rituals (Phandra) and social identity. As Baro notes, "a family who has no narzi is dishonoured in society" (p. 44).

Maisundri (Houttuynia cordata): Known as "fish mint," this pungent herb is used in post-natal soups and as a chutney with crab. It is believed to cool the stomach and aid digestion (p. 85).

Thunthini (Drymaria cordata): A creeper consumed in hot weather to "keep the stomach cool." Dried leaves are also used to treat liver ailments (p. 65).

These plants are not randomly selected; their use follows strict seasonal, ritual, and ecological protocols. For instance, Dingkhia is taboo before Bwisagu (mid-April), while Sat tithi mwigong janai—the ritual consumption of seven wild vegetables on the seventh day of Bwisagu—is believed to confer immunity for the year (p. 123).

4. Food as Medicine: The Therapeutic Dimensions of Bodo Cuisine

In Bodo tradition, the boundary between food and medicine is porous. Nearly every edible plant carries therapeutic properties, often validated through generations of empirical use.

Postpartum Care: New mothers are fed Aosia bidwi, a soup made with small chicken, banlu bwddwn (a tiny chili), black pepper, and rice, to restore strength and stimulate lactation (p. 116).

Liver and Jaundice Remedies: Khamrenga (star fruit), Gurkhia goi, and Mwitha bangal are used to treat jaundice and liver disorders (pp. 47, 50).

Respiratory and Skin Health: Basikha bibar (red flower of Phlogacanthus thyrsiflorus) and Sefali bibar (night-flowering jasmine) are consumed to prevent cough, allergy, and skin diseases during seasonal transitions (p. 40).

Wound Healing: Paste from Daogang jwla is applied to scars, while Phosothia leaves are eaten to heal internal wounds (p. 43, 95).

This pharmacological knowledge is embedded in everyday cooking. As one informant explained, "We do not eat just to fill the stomach; we eat to keep the body free from disease" (Thimfri Boro, age 102, cited in Baro, 2021, p. 117).

5. Ritual Integration: Food, Seasonality, and Cosmic Order

Bodo food practices are deeply interwoven with ritual life. Agricultural festivals like Bwisagu (spring), Magw (post-harvest), and Kati Bihu (autumn) structure the annual foodscape, each marked by specific edible offerings.

During Bwisagu, families consume Khungkha janai—a bitter curry with chicken—symbolizing the "farewell to the old year" (p. 122).

In Phandra (death rites), Narzi is fried with pig intestine and distributed to sever ties between the living and the deceased (p. 110).

The Amthisua festival (coinciding with Kamakhya's Ambubachi) involves fasting and offerings to "Mother Earth," acknowledging her "menstruation" and refraining from ploughing or harvesting (p. 125).

These rituals reinforce a cosmology in which humans, plants, and deities exist in reciprocal relationship. Food is not merely consumed; it is offered, shared, and sanctified.

6. Threats to Continuity: Modernization and Knowledge Erosion

Despite its richness, the Bodo food system faces existential threats. Baro identifies several key pressures:

Dietary Globalization: Processed foods, refined oils, and commercial vegetables are replacing wild greens, especially among urban youth.

Land Use Change: Deforestation, wetland drainage, and chemical agriculture reduce access to foraging grounds.

Intergenerational Disconnection: Younger generations, educated in mainstream schools, often lack knowledge of plant identification and preparation.

Stigmatization: Traditional foods like Napham (fermented fish) or wild ferns are sometimes viewed as "backward" by dominant caste-Hindu norms.

As elder informant Thimfri Boro lamented, "Earlier, every home had narzi. Now, many don't even know how to cook onla khari" (Baro, 2021, p. 192).

7. Toward Biocultural Conservation: Policy and Community Agency

Preserving Bodo food knowledge requires more than documentation; it demands active support for community sovereignty. We propose three pathways:

Community Ethnobotanical Inventories: Led by Bodo women's groups, these can map local plant use and seed varieties, creating living archives.

School Curriculum Integration: Teaching children to identify and prepare wild edibles can revive intergenerational transmission.

Legal Recognition: India's Biological Diversity Act (2002) and Geographical Indications framework could protect Bodo food heritage from biopiracy and commodification.

Critically, such efforts must center Bodo epistemologies—not as "data" to be extracted, but as sovereign knowledge systems deserving respect and autonomy.

CONCLUSION

The Bodo food tradition is not a relic of the past but a resilient, adaptive system that offers profound insights for our ecological moment. In its integration of biodiversity, health, and ritual, it models a form of culinary ecology that prioritizes reciprocity over extraction, diversity over uniformity, and community over commodity. As global food systems grapple with climate vulnerability and nutritional decline, the wisdom of the Bodo—from forest to feast—deserves not just preservation, but active revitalization.

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