

TRADITIONAL RELIGION OF THE BOROS OF ASSAM

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The Boros are a constituent tribe of the Great Bodo race, who in turn, belongs to the Tibeto-Burman branch of the Tibeto-Chinese Speech Family. Today, they constitute an important section of the population of the plains of Assam spreading all over the Brahmaputra Valley. Outside Assam, they are also found in the contiguous areas of North Bengal, Meghalaya, Tripura, Nagaland etc.

In the opinion of Endle,² Stack,³ Gait,⁴ and others, the Boros are animists in their religion and its underlying principle is one of belief in, fear and dread of, the supernatural powers. This is a hasty generalization and does not stand the scrutiny of logic. The early British rulers, writers and the Christian missionaries had the knack of calling the people of primitive cultures and non-Christian tribals pagan, heathen and animists. Animism, in its literal sense of the term, means living or the one which exhibits some sort of movement. At the dawn of human civilization, religion was in a crude form without having a clear concept of God or any other supernatural agency. To the primitives, Nature appeared as something inexplicable jargon. The movements of clouds, stones, plants, stream or branches of trees caused by natural forces like wind were taken as living objects and the primitives worshipped these animating objects as possessed of life and spirits. Melville Herskovits contends that except when used in loosest sense, the term 'animism' or 'animistic' cannot be applied to the total system of belief of any people and that Christianity is animistic in as much as it teaches the belief in human soul as an integral part of our body and the soul causes movements of the body.

The traditional religion of the Boros is not animistic but Bathouism presided over by Supreme God Bathou Borai or Bathou Raja. The religion is monotheistic with the polytheistic form of worship. In its polytheistic stage, it lapsed into gross ritualism, but in its highest consummate form, it is purely monotheistic. Huxley in his Perennial Philosophy reiterated the theory of Aristotle that all the primitive religions are monotheistic in its origin. The Boro religion, therefore, is not animistic in nature but shares the same status with the ancient Rig Vedic religion, and different Boro legends, folklores and rituals of worships adumbrated the belief of the Boros in personal God Bathou Borai alias Bathou Raja, who is supreme and creator. As regards the traditional religion of the people, the following folklore may be cited here.

Boroni dhoroma ma mon?
 Godo-godai hay logofor,
 Boroni dhoroma ma mon?

Friu-a-friu, friu-a-friu kham damnai
 Riu riu shifung damnai
 Ting ta ting ta jota damnai

Boroni dhoroma bino mon hay logofor,
 Bino mon.

(What was the religion of the Boros in the days of old, Oh friends what was the religion? Friu-a friu-the drum beats, riu riu-echoes the tune of the flute, ting ta ting ta- claps the cymbal - that was the religion, Oh friends, that was the religion).

The folklore cited above refers to the beating of drum, playing of flute and clapping of cymbals which are the basic features of the rituals of Bathou worship during the Kherai Festivals.

The folklore, therefore, unmistakably refers to the Bathou religion as the traditional religion of the Boro people.

Boro Concept of Bathouism

Bathou is the compound word of two formation, viz., 'Ba' meaning 'five' and 'Thou' meaning 'deep'. Bathou religion, therefore, is the religion of five deep meanings. As a matter of fact, in the philosophy of Bathou religion and the rituals of Bathou worship, as we would see in the following, the predominance of numeral 'five'. Hence, the name Bathou. Here a modest attempt has been made to focus how the numeral 'five' is associated with the traditional religion of the people.

Before the creation, Aham Guru, the Ultimate God emerged in this vast void and uttered first five words, viz. Om, Shring, Kling, fut and Che and with these five words, Aham Guru created the first five elements, viz., universe, air, sky, water and light which are equivalent to what is known as the Panchabhut (Kshiti, Ap, Teja, Marut and Vyam) in the Hindu mythology. Aham Guru, therefore, in the Boro mythology, is the Supreme creator of five elements and hence is called and worshipped as Bathou. Bathou is also attributed with the source of five best qualities, viz. truth, knowledge, power, beauty and godness.

Bathou has moral and spiritual messages, viz., message on holy realisation, message on holy practices, message on love, and message on hatred, each giving emphasis on five essentials. His message on holy realization includes the realization of Bathou as Supreme God, realization of one's soul with Bathou, realization of Bathou Buri, the consort of Bathou Borai realization of Panchabhut and the realization of five traditional gods, viz. Aileng

(god of earth), Agrang (god of water), Koila (god of air), Sanjaborle (god of fire/light) and Rajkumbre (god of sky); and the realization of the need for good work in this world. His message on holy practices puts emphasis on meditation for God, conversation on religious and spiritual matters, offerings of charities to the poor, love for all living beings and unity in work. His message on love dwells on love for Obonglaori (Aham Guru; Supreme God/Creator), love for fellow beings, love for wife/husband and children, love for animals and all objects of Nature, and love for one's Motherland and Universe. The message on hatred emphasises on five sins, viz., sin of murder, sin of stealing, sin of speaking a lie, sin of adultery and sin of keeping with bad company.

Bathou is believed to have five mouths to teach and preach the essentials for godly life and five eyes to observe the shortcomings of his votaries and see the troubles and sufferings of the people here on earth and get them redressed.

Bathou emphasises on reverence for five authorities, viz., Father, Mother, Guru (teacher), gosai (gods) and gossaisri (goddesses).

The Boro traditional deities find their abodes at five places, viz., Kheraisali (Place for Kherai worship/festival), Garzasali (Than, place for Garza worship), No' Ma No' (Main house of a household, Sijou (Euphorbia splendens) and hagra (jungle).

Bathou, therefore, is associated with multiple of numeral 'five' in many ways and hence is symbolized by Sijou (euphorbia) plant characterized by five depressions and five ridges. Similarly, the Bathou altar is encircled by five rings of bamboo splits.

The foregoing discussion reveals the preponderance of numeral 'five' in quality and attributes of the Boro traditional God which evokes one's deep pondering over the subject. Hence, the Boro name Bathou (five Deep) of their traditional God is befitting.

Boro Deities

The Boros can aptly be described as the monotheists in so far that they believe in, and worship only one Supreme God - Bathou Borai. He is the Creator, He is the Preserver and He is the Destroyer - Three in One, One in Three which is expressed in the Boro dialect as Rangrachi, Moitahachi, Gon-gongtham. They are polytheists in so far that they recognise a number of other lesser divinities which are elemental. B.H. Hodgson observed that they are devout worshippers of starry hosts of deities.¹³ Below we give a brief introduction to these deities.

1. Bathou

Bathou Borai, Supreme God is worshipped and propitiated as the Chief household deity under various names, viz., Bathou Borai, Bathou Raja, Song Raja, Sib Borai, Shri Borai, Gila Damra, Kouria Borai, Koirata Raja, Mahadeo, Mahakal, Abla Kungar, Zomon Zola, Pagla Raja, Poiko Thakur etc. etc. He is not elemental god and is identified with Siva, the Third Power of the Hindu Trinity. He is symbolised by Sijou (euphorbia splendens) tree, and hence is also called Sijour Borai, Sijou Raja, Sijou Gosai etc. In every household, Bathou altar is installed at the north-eastern corner of the courtyard.

Now the question arises as to why the euphorbia splendens is taken as a symbol of Bathou Borai. The reasons are not far to seek. Firstly, as noted

earlier, Bathou is associated with numeral 'five' in his quality and function. Euphorbia splendens is characterised by five ridges and five depressions. Secondly, there is a tradition that Bathou created euphorbia splendens first among the vegetations in this Universe and took shelter under its shadow,¹⁴ and hence the plant stands as an emblem of Bathou. Next, it is contended that the Boros and other Bodo tribes had the influence of the Chinese culture in the east and the Egyptian and Babylonian cultures in the west probably due to trade intercourse with the people of those countries. In religion, they in their original homeland were the worshippers of the symbol of vegetation sprouting in the form of twig of euphorbia splendens that grows naturally with all its stems sprouting vertically upwards with five ribs and five depressions.¹⁵

2. Mainao

Mainao, the consort of Bathou, is the chief female deity, and is known by various names, viz. Mauthansi, Song Buri, Bathou Buri etc. She is the guardian and protectress of the household, family wealth and paddy in the field, and hence the name Mainao, a name of two formation - Mai (paddy) and No (house), and is equivalent to Hindu goddess of wealth, Lakshmi. She is symbolized by a bamboo pole decorated with a piece of red cloth and planted on a lump of earth raised in the easternmost apartment of the main house of every traditional household. She is worshipped in the name of every variety of seasonal paddy crop cultivated round the year.

3. Lesser Divinities

Among the lesser divinities of the Boro pantheon are Aileng, the god of earth and bodyguard of Bathou; Kazi, the Minister of Bathou Raja; Koila, the god of air; Rajputar, son of Bathou Raja;

Rajkandra, the grandson of Bathou Raja, Mosaraja, the Monarch of the woods; Manasu, the goddess of the river Manas; Agrang, the General of Bathou Raja, Alaikungri-Bilaikungri, Bathou's daughters; Laokar gosai, the protector of the cowherds etc.¹⁶ Song Raja is the manifestation of Bathou Raja and is sheltered inside the main house along with Mainao and is symbolized by slightly raised lump of earth. About a hundred years ago, Endle observed, Song Raja was worshipped by the women inside the main house during the period of their monthly impurity.¹⁷ Bulli Buri, the goddess of learning is the manifestation of Mainao, and is equivalent to Hindu goddess Saraswati. Besides, there are a hosts of traditional deities whose identities nor functions can distinctly be described.

Other Supernatural Powers

The Boros believe in the existence of various kinds of supernatural powers called 'bhuts' (evil spirits) hovering all around. They are believed to live in the air, fire, water, sky, mountains, jungle, rocks, lakes, streams, shrubs, marshes, graveyards etc. These spirits are known to be malicious rather than benevolent, and actively interfere in the affairs and health of men for malevolent purposes and cause sickness, sufferings, misfortunes and similar other calamities to receive propitiations from them through sacrifices. Among evil spirits, the people very commonly refer to the Harai Bangko, otherwise known as Hasung modai which misleads and frightens the night travellers. A victim of the attack by the Harai Bangko described that it appears in the guise of a dark man in contrasting white garment with long teeth and burning torch at the centre of its chests. At the first instance, it reportedly appears as a man of short stature but gradually grows taller,¹⁸ and taller until it has grown into a gigantic one. Kubir is one of the worse species of evil spirit ever known to the rural Boro folks.

It is as malicious as it can be. As regards the description of the kubir, Endle writes that he is a white man with three legs and eight teeth, apparently the same as the Hindu Pluto, the lord of the shades as well as of wealth.¹⁹ Ojha Joynarayan mentions a number of kubirs, viz., Petani kubir, Birani kubir, Petbira kubir, Songkabira kubir, Ih kubir, Bish kubir, Akola²⁰ kubir, kao kubir, Dhon kubir, Langtia kubir, etc. Kodal Narzari mentions Bodha kubir whose victim, he claimed, to have successfully treated. About a hundred years ago Endle collected the names of some kubirs, viz., Jal kubir, Thal kubir, Kubir Borai, Kubir Buri etc. Another kubir of common reference is Dhon kubir, the owner of the abandoned treasures and equivalent to Kuvera, the Hindu god of wealth. He is believed to offer the treasures under his possession to a person of his liking either free of cost or in return of sacrifice of cock, goat, pigeon or even human being which are clearly laid down at the time of offer in a dream.

The people believed that deities exist in all rivers directing their courses and propitiate them with sacrifices. The inhabitants on the bank of the rivers Sonkosh, Janali, Pekua, Tista, Aie, etc. in the State of Assam and North Bengal speak of horrified experiences and miseries caused by ever changing courses of these rivers during the summer seasons which are believed to be the acts of the respective controlling deities. Hence the people in early days worshipped the deities of the rivers in their respective areas on the banks of these rivers. Sanyal reports that the Boros of Jalpaiguri district of North Bengal worshipped the deities of the rivers Toorsa, Tista, etc.²²

The people also believe in the existence of the spirit of the dead known to them as Gotoiso and its active interference in the family atmosphere of the household the deceased belonged to at least

for a few weeks after the death had occurred. It is believed that the spirit of the death often visits the house till the sradh is performed. In the remote villages, the house in which death of a person has occurred is abandoned and dismantled. The present writer finds the children often being frightened and silenced by the elders with the presence or coming of the gotoiso.

Worship and Propitiation

The worship and propitiation of the deities is called modai hunai in the Boro language. The people have no temple nor do they have any fixed place for worship and sacrifices. The principal deity Bathou and his consort Mainao are worshipped in the individual households regularly or as and when occasion may demand for the welfare of the family. The ceremony takes place at the Bathou altar installed at the north eastern corner of the courtyard permanently. Bathou is also worshipped outside the house compound by the entire village community once a year in solemn pomp. Such annual community worship is called Kherai. For Kherai, a temporary Bathou altar is installed outside the house compound, away from the village. The bank of a flowing river or a quiet place in the vicinity of the village is usually chosen for the purpose, and such place is called Than.

Bathou Altar

The installation of Bathou altar at the courtyard for domestic worship or outside the house compound for community worship is an important aspect of Bathouism. First, a Sijou (euphorbia) plant and below it a tulsi (basil) plant are planted symbolising Bathou Borai and Bathou Buri respectively, and are encircled by a fence consisting of sixteen or eighteen bamboo sticks planted in pair in circumference which are then fastened by a pair of longer

bamboo splits in five rings. Each bamboo stick symbolises a lesser divinity referred to earlier. This means that sixteen or eighteen different lesser divinities are given place at the Bathou altar to receive prayers and oblations along with Bathou Borai and Bathou Buri. In the district of Kamrup (now Kamrup, Barpeta and Pragjyotisa districts) eighteen lesser divinities are honoured and propitiated as against sixteen in the district of Goalpara²³ (now Goalpara, Dhubri and Kokrajhar districts). The five rings of bamboo splits fastening the sixteen or eighteen bamboo sticks planted in circumference represent the deities of the Panchabhut.²⁴ A little space of the altar towards the west is left out without being covered by the bamboo rings from the fourth stage upward. This is the entrance of the altar. The altar is spacious, and apart from sijou and tulsi plants, many other symbolic elements are accommodated inside the altar when erected for the Kherai. From the central point of the altar, an embankment of white pounded rice is raised, two rows of Kangla hagra (a kind of wild reeds) are planted symbolises the fertile Mother Earth and the wild reeds symbolise the prosperous crops at the bosom of the Mother Earth. As regards the reason of planting wild reeds in particular, there is a folk tradition. According to this tradition, Bathou created them only next to the²⁵ sijou plant among the vegetation in this Universe. Inside the altar, are placed a stone and an egg symbolising the permanence of truth and the creation of this Universe from an egg respectively.²⁶ The top of the Sijou plant is fastened five rounds with white thread symbolising unity and love in holy Bathou. A piece of white cloth remain unfurled at the top of the altar signifying the formless existence (Nirakar) of Abonglaori alias Aham Guru, the Infinite God. A jarikot (a long brass metalled water pot) containing holy water is placed at the altar. The fore-parts of bamboo are planted, one each side of the entrance of the altar. On the top of these

bamboo branches are fastened patches of cotton wool with white thread. Another significant feature of the Bathou altar erected for Kherai worship is the plantation of three sticks crossed at the entrance symbolising the Boro Trinity, viz. God in One, One in Three, expressed in the traditional Boro terms as Rangrachi, Moitahachi, Gon-gongtham.²⁷

Garza

Garza Modai Hunai as termed by the Boros is another important religious institution of the people and is carried on out of door at the place permanently selected for the purpose known as Garza sali or Than. This is observed once a year in the month of Magha (January) by the entire village community. It is the purificatory ceremony dedicated to the village deities to purify the uncleanness of the entire village and its inhabitants. It is believed that the village and its inhabitants become unclean due to their contacts with unclean people on various occasions during the calendar year, such as, festivities, marriages, day-to-day business transactions involving act of omission and commission, and, thereby, incur the wrath of the village deities, who consequently are likely to unleash natural calamities in various forms, viz., pestilence, draught, flood, etc. on the villagers, and thereby, bring about their untold miseries and sufferings. To avert this possible danger, the anger of the deities must be appeased befittingly and the entire village community must get clean ceremonially. It is to this end that Garza worship is performed by the entire village community prior to the Kherai worship as purificatory and preparatory rites. This ceremony symbolises the act of discarding with what is bad and evil, and washing off uncleanness as the term 'garza' implies.

Rituals

As the ritual of worship begins, the Ojha (incantist) invites Bathou Raja, the Supreme God and all other lesser divinities chanting mantras to take their respective seats provided inside the altar to receive prayers and oblations. Douri, Ojha and Doudhini (priest, incantist and female oracle respectively) are three important personalities controlling the rituals of the Bathou worship. Douri offers sacrifices, Ojha chants mantras while the Doudini,²⁸ weired looking and 'somewhat possessed woman' performs typical dances throughout the rituals. These personalities are deemed receptive of divine inspirations and coversant with the deities in obscure language.

In course of rituals, offerings are made to the deities. Offerings consist of milk, honey, parched rice, eggs, fruits, betel nuts and leaves, flowers, red lead (cochineal), he-goat, cock, pigeon, etc.²⁹ Libation of fermented country liquor always accompany the offerings and sacrifices. The sacrificial animal or bird is beheaded at one stroke with the help of a sabre called Impi, and its head and blood are offered to the deity while the flesh is cooked and consumed by the votaries themselves and other onlookers. The worship is consummated with liberal consumption of liquor with fried meat of the sacrificial animal or bird at the place of worship.

Besides the community worship (Kherai, Garza, etc.) worship of Bathou takes places in every traditional household for the welfare of the family. Offerings to Bathou and Mainao is a regular affair. Besides, individual deities (lesser divinities) and evil spirits are worshipped and propitiated by individual households as and when circumstances arise. The evil spirits, as noted earlier, are looked upon as supernatural agents and malicious whose intentions are malevolent rather than benevolent

and cause sickness and misfortunes to receive propitiations from the people. Hence, all diseases, misfortunes, deaths and other calamities are attributed to them. The sick man is supposed to be possessed by the discontented deity who racks him with pain as punishment for impiety or neglect of the deity in question. This is called 'modai ornai' in the Boro language, meaning 'the deity is biting' or 'deity has seized' etc. In the remote villages, in early days, one used to come across cases which modern physicians would call folio victims, but the people attributed such cases to the biting of deity. Endle writes that the sick man lying prostrate with virulent malaria fever was very commonly described as being bit or seized by the deity.³⁰ If sufferings came to a person, the village exorcist known as 'Gamini Ojha' was summoned to the sick man's aid. After the repetition of certain invocations through the exorcist, the offended deity would be asked what sacrifice he required in order to spare the victim. The deity was believed to reply through the exorcist and the sacrificial animal named. The sick man, thereupon, vowed forthwith to offer the sacrifice of animal named on his recovery. This is called 'modaino lujanai', meaning 'promise or undertaking made to the offended deity'. Joynarayan Bosumatari who runs a Bathou ashram at Naigaon in the present district of Kokrajhar, Assam confidently asserts that the deity really bits or seizes the offending person who can be cured only by propitiating the offended deity. The deity in question can be ascertained from the pattern of the sufferings or the behaviour of the attacked or seized.³¹

Sacrifices

Bhoben Narzi writes that in annual Kherai worship. Bathou receives sacrifice of a hog. Few drops of blood and the head of the sacrificial animal are placed before Bathou for his propitiation.

Bathou when worshipped as Abla Kunggar is propitiated with a jar of liquor and a hog. Agrang received the sacrifice of an uncastrated he-goat. Koila is offered a cock. Kazi receives an uncastrated he-goat. Rajputar and Rajkandra are worshipped together with the sacrifice of the head of a hog. Zomon zola and Zomon zo together receive a red cock. They are looked upon as the guardians of wild beasts, and if worshipped, they are believed to grant safety to the people and the animals from the dangers of the ferocious wild beasts. They are also worshipped as Kokka Borai and Kokka Buri, and also as Changchalia modai and are offered with a red cock. Allai kungri and Billai kungri receive the sacrifice of a hog. Bhandari, the deity of fishes in waters is propitiated with a cock for safety and good catching of fishes. Ranachandi alias Ronpagli is first appeased with a cock, and then with cooked meat of the sacrificial cock. Mainao when worshipped as Bulli Buri and Kasuli Buri is given the head and a half of the entire body of a hog. It is believed that Kasuli Buri, when worshipped, makes medicine effective for the cure of the sick. Laokhar Gosai receives offerings of a pair of pigeon which are released alive in the sky in the name of offering to this deity. For Tista Buri, a she-goat is sacrificed.³²

Worship of Ancestors

There are traces of ancestral worship among the Boros of early days. On the day of Sradh ceremony, food and drinks prepared for the people invited are first offered not only to the spirit of the man died recently and for whom the sradh is being performed, but also to the spirits of the ancestors who died long ago. During the Kherai festival, dhoudhini (female oracle) performs a number of typical dances in dedication to the deities worshipped at that time, and one of those dances called Jara Pagla dance is dedicated to the spirits of the ancestors. Again, on the second day of

Boisagu festival (Springtime festival) or, on the first day of the New Year, food and drinks are placed in a corner of the courtyard in propitiation of the spirits of the ancestors. In short, the ancestors receive the place of honour along with the deities in the social and religious systems of the people.

Priesthood

In early days, as observed by Hodgson, the Boros had three categories of priests known as Dhami, Douri and Ojha.³³ The Douri performs social and religious rites, such as offerings of sacrifices, conduct of marriages and other social and religious ceremonies. He is found in every village. The Dhami is a sort of Douri, but controls larger jurisdiction, who at best, can be called district Douri presiding over a number of villages and the Douris there in. The Ojha is a medicine man, better known as village exorcist who cures the sick by chanting mantras. He is understood to be capable of ascertaining the diseases of the sick kmen or which deity is responsible for the sufferings of a man, and what sacrifice is to be made to appease the deity in question for the cure of the sick. Of these categories of priests, the Douri and Ojha are still found surviving to this day.

In early days, it is contended, Swargoaroi, Yaopramaroi, Brahmaroi and Narzaroi septs of the Boro society constituted priestly and quasi-priestly class whose members alone were qualified to act as priests,³⁴ but as things stand today, there appears to be no authorised and exclusive priestly class equivalent to the Brahmins of the Hindu caste system usually employed for the performance of social and religious rites. Whoever affords to learn the rituals of offerings or sacrifices, recitation of mantras and the obscure language of the

deity can become a Douri or Ojha and is universally recognised as such after he has displayed certain degree of his newly acquired skill and talents. He, however, continues to live a normal life of an ordinary man, marries and cultivates for his livelihood. On the occasion of sacrifices, the Douri appropriates a share of the sacrificial animal in return for his services. During the time of Hodgson in Assam, Douri received three days' labour a year from each adult male member of his area towards his work in the field while Ojha was remunerated solely by fees paid by those attended on.³⁵

The foregoing shows that the Bathou religion of the Boros is based on belief in the existence and worship of one Supreme God - Bathou on one hand, and the recognition and propitiation of starry host of other elemental deities on the other. The Bathou religion, therefore, contains the elements of both monotheism and polytheism. The study also reveals that the whole religious system of the people is too ritualistic. The social practices having religious sanction, such as, brewing and consumption of country liquor on all ceremonial occasions, sacrifice of animals and poultry birds are looked upon as gross vices and abuses of the religion. Nevertheless, the people professed this faith in their true traditional fashion until they succumbed to the process of sanskritisation. The sanskritisation of the people and their culture began with the conversion of the then³⁶ royal family to Hinduism as early as 1790 A.D. The coming of the Brahma cult among a section of the people in early part of the twentieth century A.D. is the culmination of the sanskritic influence on the people.

Notes & References

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- * **Kherai** is the greatest religious festival of the traditional Boros, celebrated annually, and is characterised by the worship of Bathou borai and his consort Mainao along with other lesser divinities. This festival is primarily of two kinds, viz. Umrao, Dorshon, Nokhor, and are celebrated in different months during the calendar year.
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- * According to the Boro myth and legend, the human generation began out of two eggs. Monsinsin, the first of the human generation was born from one egg, and Diba Borai and Diba Buri from the other.
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32. Bhuben Narzi, *Op.cit.*, pp. 245-50.
33. Hodgson, *Op.cit.*, p. 77 ff.
34. R.N. Brahma, *Boro Yatir Songkepta Parishoy*, p. 16; Sanyal, *Op.cit.*, p. 6; Endle, *Op.cit.*, pp. 26-28.
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36. Endle, *Op.cit.*, pp. 6-7; J.B. Bhattacharjee, *State Formation in Pre-Colonial Tribal North East*, Reprint, pp. 7, 11, NEHU, 1984.