

Bodo Cultural Beliefs: Knowledge Effective for Managing Historical and Contemporary Challenges Imposed on Indigenous People

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Indigenous cultures prescribed a means of maximizing the benefits they produced and enjoyed in their relationship with each other and the environment—based on their understanding of the nature of existence and how to live in harmony with the forces shaping the nature of existence. The emergence of civilization introduced the claim that rational abilities superseded indigenous knowledge. This was followed by positivism and the claim that knowledge passed through three stages: mythological, philosophical, and scientific. This impacted indigenous cultures in ways that reached a height when postcolonial development experts convinced national leaders that progress required adopting advances in science. A failure to modernize was regarded as holding back progress. With the development paradigm now regarded as inadequate for achieving its goals and with the rise of the sustainability discourse, there is appreciation for indigenous knowledge. This article describes an indigenous cultural knowledge system that reflects the insight and wisdom of the world's most respected scientific and philosophical traditions. The beliefs of the Bodo people of Northeast India are used as an example of an indigenous worldview that portrays insight proven to have value that is comparable to the natural sciences, plus theories of natural law and political philosophy.

Keywords: indigenous knowledge systems, the elements, systems theory, process science, natural law, reliable knowledge

Introduction

The earliest cultural worldviews were developed during a period that is referred to by political philosophers as humanity's original state in nature. A cultural worldview represents a social group's perspective on the nature of existence, thus how it conceives nature, self, and society. It contains a fundamental view of the nature of things. A worldview is a lens through which a culture views the world, and it prescribes how to best engage the forces shaping the nature of reality. The values, ethics, norms, and beliefs expressed in a culture's worldview are not human preferences but are regarded as the conditions for life, which is understood to represent what is ordained by the forces shaping the nature of reality (Geertz, 1973, p. 90). Between ethics and worldview, between the approved style of life and the assumed structure of reality, there is conceived to be a simple and fundamental congruence such that they complete one another and lend one another meaning. A cultural worldview also prescribes a means by which the members of a social group can maximize the benefits they are able to produce

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and enjoy in their relationship with each other and with the environment. A worldview is the way in which a culture expresses its understanding of the general meaning of life. It prescribes a means by which its members will not only live well but also enjoy a high level of life satisfaction, contentment, social harmony, flourishing, and prosperity. This includes prescribing a means by which the members of society can experience their highest good and society as a whole can experience what political philosophy refers to as the good life. That is to say, the worldview of an indigenous cultural group explains how to realize the goal it aims to achieve by means of its social activities. The goal of social action is cohesion, stability, social order, the production of what is necessary to satisfy its material needs, sustainable peace, and the ability to perpetuate the culture.

Thus, a culture's worldview shapes the lives of the individual members of the social group and the social practices of the culture. Such prescriptions are expressed in the form of cultural norms or statements of cultural ethics and are the basis of indigenous knowledge systems. The worldview sets the tone for the character and quality of social life and the moral and aesthetic style and mood of the culture. It is the underlying guide for experiencing goodness in their relationships with each other and in relation to the natural order. The experience of goodness (i.e., being fortunate or even the feeling of being blessed) is established as the basis of social dynamics and is regarded as representing the way of life ordained by the forces shaping the nature of things, which the worldview prescribes. The worldview is made emotionally acceptable by being presented as a representation of the actual nature of things, which cultural life is an authentic expression of. Therefore, a worldview encompasses beliefs that shape the outlook on the life of the members of a culture, and a worldview is pertinent in shaping their experience of reality (including the meaning and fulfillment they experience) and an understanding of how to best be well-integrated within the fabric of existence (Mifjud & Sammut, 2023, p. 2).

Indigenous cultures organize social activity in a way that supports the group's ability to effectively respond to conditions imposed by reality. In this respect, indigenous knowledge systems are established to enable the social group to maintain a complementary connection between its members and its environment. The aim is to establish the necessary mechanisms (e.g., its normative structure, worldview, its higher-order values, and strategies for fulfilling its material needs) that enable the culture to face and manage the challenges imposed by external forces. In other words, an effective adaptation to the variability of external forces demands maintenance of the culture's social processes, its system for producing material and aesthetic artifacts, and its boundary protection system. But this must be done in a way that is in line with the culture's endeavor to perpetuate its identity, heritage, and higher-order values (Miller, 2018, p. 90).

Therefore, the social life of indigenous cultures can be described as an endeavor to organize social activity in a way that maintains cultural integrity despite external challenges. The fact is that cultures are subject to disruptive external forces of various types. Indeed, without effectively responding to and/or adjusting to the externally imposed challenges, indigenous cultures, their heritage, people, identity, their preferred way of life, human rights, resources, and very existence can be threatened. Indigenous knowledge prescribes a means of withstanding the forces that could diminish the vitality of a culture by institutionalizing normative and structural mechanisms that serve as functional strategies for maintaining equilibrium.

Equilibrium is a fundamental reference point for analyzing the processes by which a system either comes to terms with the exigencies imposed by a changing environment without essential change in its own structure or fails to come to terms and undergoes other processes, such as structural change, dissolution as a boundary-maintaining system, or the consolidation of some impairment leading to the establishment of secondary structures of a pathological character. (Parsons, 2007, p. 423)

Given the extent of challenges indigenous cultures face from external forces, the integrity of the culture can only be maintained by means of aligning its future development plans (i.e., its goal-attainment behavior, activity, and processes) with its collective value orientation and its cultural heritage. Indigenous knowledge has served the purpose of maintaining equilibrium and boundary protection since time immemorial. In fact, if the time humanity has spent in existence is calculated in comparison to an hour, then humanity existed within cohesive social groups that were attuned to the environment on the basis of such knowledge systems for about fifty-five minutes of that hour. Another three minutes were spent as agricultural villagers, when a culture's worldview was still regarded as a reliable knowledge source. So, the time spent in civilization only represents a very small segment of time humanity has spent in existence. However, many people might regard it as the most significant and advanced stage, which, for them, means that this incredibly short period of time overshadows the prior periods of human existence.

With the emergence of civilization, what is regarded as epistemologically reliable knowledge underwent two significant transformations that would gradually have an impact on all the world's people, cultures, and societies. The first is the claim—of classical philosophers—that human reasoning is an emergent quality sparked by fundamental principles that shape the natural order. “Rationalism is the practice or principle of basing opinions, actions, beliefs, and knowledge on reasoning rather than religion, sensory experience, myths, or folk beliefs. Rationality produced a major epistemological shift that changed the nature of human consciousness” (Miller, 2025, pp. 192-193). Humanity no longer conceived of reality on the basis of a sensuous, emotive, empathic, and participatory mindset but began to conceive on the basis of discursive, conceptual, abstract, and analytic rationality. Rationalism relies on reflection, logic, and being aware of our mental operation, which makes mind and consciousness a type of ivory tower in which individuals can contemplate what they come to regard as the ideal realm.

The second is the scientific revolution, which proposes that empiricism is the best means of gaining the most reliable knowledge about the nature of existence and the best way to manage it. Consequently, empiricists claim that reliable knowledge has passed through three stages of development. The first is the stage when cultural worldviews were regarded as reliable knowledge, which was subsequently regarded as representing humanity's elementary level of mental development. The second was the philosophical, which relied on reasoning and metaphysics to penetrate the noumenal phenomena of existence and to prescribe rational ideals. The third and what positivists regard as the highest or most advanced level is gaining reliable knowledge by means of applying the scientific method.

Indigenous cultures have been heavily affected by the historical endeavor to bring the world's people into the fold of civilization and to plan their existence in ways that are in line with civilization's advanced knowledge systems. This has required extremely significant internal adaptations as a result of having to adjust to the conditions of what is regarded as progress (Sauer, 1952, pp. 6-14; Barker, 2006, pp. 3-5). The insight needed to successfully manage the threats and/or adjust to the imposed demands must be based on a knowledge system that is able to withstand the force of what is regarded as the most advanced intellectual, philosophical, scientific, and technological knowledge. This article describes an indigenous cultural worldview that matches the insight and wisdom of the world's most respected wisdom, scientific, and philosophical traditions. It proposes that the best way to manage the nature of reality is by understanding the processes and interactions between the elements. In fact, viewpoints on the nature and interactions of the elements are a part of the worldview of a number of indigenous cultures around the world. It is the basis of their ancient traditional belief systems and expressed in

the way they organize their social systems. This includes several of the indigenous peoples of America, ancient China, Tibet, India, Ancient Greece, and a number of African cultures. However, this article will focus on the role that the elements play in the cultural worldview of the Bodo People of Northeast India.

The following section of the article (Section 2) provides a brief introduction of Bodo culture and its struggle to effectively manage external forces that threaten the culture. The emphasis is on their desire to maintain self-determination while adjusting to the impact that civilization, kingdoms and empires, nation states, and now globalization and media-promoted popular culture have on their effort to maintain cultural integrity. Section 3 explains the Bodo understanding of the elements and its relevance to the social and natural sciences (e.g., cosmology, ontology, ethics, self-cultivation, social formation, natural law, physics, systems theory, and governance). Therefore, Section 3 includes a comparison of the Bodo understanding of the elements and the knowledge of the world's scientific and philosophical traditions. The final section of this article explains why the depth of insight, wisdom, and emancipatory power of indigenous people—their principles and higher-order human values—could play a key role in helping humanity tackle its most daunting challenges. Therefore, the conclusion is also forward-looking in terms of anticipating what a greater appreciation and respect for indigenous knowledge can have for enabling humanity to experience integrality, enhance the human experience, and realize sustainable futures.

Bodo Culture and Its Ongoing Struggle to Manage External Challenges

Northeast India is often described as one of the most conflict-ridden regions of South Asia. The conflicts are attributed to the indigenous peoples' resistance to a large influx of migrants into the region, their quest for increased self-determination, and their endeavor to achieve a stronger sense of autonomy. Indeed, there have been a large influx of migrants (many of whom are illegal) from Myanmar, Bangladesh, and some from Nepal. There have been so many migrants entering the region that there are pocket locations where they outnumber the local people. However, a closer examination reveals that the struggle for self-determination is linked to longstanding issues dating back to ancient history that involve an ongoing struggle to effectively manage external challenges while maintaining cultural integrity (see Table 1 below).

The Bodo, a significant group within the Tibetan-Burman tribes of Northeast India, constitutes the largest and most prominent segment of non-Aryan population in the vast Brahmaputra River valley region of the state of Assam—a region of the state that is referred to as Bodoland (Barua, 1951, p. 6). As a distinct ethnic and minority community, it is listed as one of the top 10 tribal populations in India (out of 705 officially recognized tribes). However, although they have the largest population in the region, they are considered a minority. This is due to the fact that, in addition to being a tribal community, their ethnicity is regarded as having Tibetan-Burmese origins (although, of course, their nationality is Indian). Ancient history identifies them with the Bodo-Kirat ethnic group. The Bodo encompasses subtribes like the Boros, Rabhas, Dimasa, Garos, Lalungs, and Tripuris (some of whom live in other parts of Assam and the Northeast of India outside of Bodoland). Archaeological surveys of the region have uncovered settlements dating back to 10,000 BCE, indicating well-developed cultural activity in the region during the Neolithic period. Overall, archaeological findings suggest that the earliest indigenous cultures established villages, crafted pottery, wove garments, practiced horticulture and husbandry, cultivated rice and silkworms, and used basic tools. Evidence indicates that they engaged in various exchanges with other tribal groups. The quality of their artifacts enabled the Bodo to forge substantial trade, diplomatic, and intercultural connections with other cultural groups in Assam, Bhutan, Nepal, other parts of India, and China.

The earliest historical, anthropological, and missionary accounts portray Bodo people as having a type of innocence (e.g. “honest, truthful, straightforward, and generally trustworthy”) that is characteristic of indigenous people who have not lost their sense of pristine humanness (Endle, 1911, p. 3). In fact, leaders of the Bodo cultural community argue that in addition to the pursuit for self-determination, Bodo people should strive to revivify their pristine innocence.

Table 1

Brief Overview of the Extent to Which the Bodo Were Faced With Numerous Intrusions That Date Back Into Their Ancient History

| Years | Ancient Assam |
|--------------------|---|
| (350 BCE-1206 ACE) | Bodo villages are caught between several kingdoms fighting for control of the region. In addition, they are the earliest endeavors of mainstream Indians to establish a Brahmanical social and religious order in the region. |
| | Medieval Assam |
| (1206-1826) | The conflict between local empires continued; however, the invasion by Bakhtiar Khilji is added (a Turkish-Afghan military general). In addition, there were Burmese invasions and occupations. |
| | Colonial Assam |
| (1826-1947) | The British brought in a large number of migrants to work in their tea plantations. Demonstrations protesting British policies resulted in a number of fatalities. |
| | Post-Colonial Assam |
| (1947-) | India adopts the modernization development plan. Indigenous cultures are urged to modernize their traditional subsistence practices by engaging in more commercial and market-oriented socio-economic practices. |

However, the Bodo faced threats that date back into antiquity from nearly all directions. To fully grasp the impact of ongoing migrations and the efforts of empire builders to dominate Bodo people, their lands, and resources, plus the profound disruptions of colonization on the culture, land, and resources of the Bodo would necessitate a book of several volumes. Therefore, this article does not aim to condense millennia of history into a brief summary. It is clear that history, the endeavor to establish empires, the era of Modernity, and mercantilism have adversely affected all indigenous people. This article emphasizes that, to withstand such extensive imposition, cultures have had to find something within (i.e., within the nature of the culture and its worldview) to withstand the forces imposing on them from without. As is true with individuals, without an inner resilience based on wisdom, values, and principles that enable building a strong internal constitution, indigenous cultures will be completely overrun by powerful external forces.

Therefore,

The Bodo have been engaged in an awakening that has evolved over the centuries. The awakening was sparked by the need to devise a viable response to external pressures and forces. Bodo people were convinced that adherence to the foundational normative values shaping their cultural worldview could generate social power (i.e., Saori). Saori means the building up of and the flourishing of the community. (Miller, 2019, p. 34)

However, the cultural principle of saorai can also mean self-reflection, deliberation, and collective reflection (e.g., saorai mell). In other words, they shared the conviction that they should rely on the principles and values rooted in their cultural worldview as the basis for establishing a common goal based on shared values. They envisioned living in accordance with their time-honored tradition of customary law (natural law, natural rights, participatory governance, local self-governance, and mutuality). Bodo customary traditions represent an institutionalized

prescription for integrating everyday practical life with its normative ethos so that they are in accord. Customary laws reflect a

general conception of the order of existence and the means of actualizing a culture's highest value aspirations regarding self, society, and nature. The tone, character, and quality of social life, its moral and aesthetic style, and mood are all reflections of a culture's customary traditions and normative ethos. (Geertz, 1973, p. 112, 127)

Bodo customary laws are based on the belief that individual and social well-being, civic virtue, social solidarity, and the flourishing of society result from self-cultivation. Self-cultivation involves shaping one's character to be in accord with the principles of Loathi in order to experience elevated thoughts, Saithi to experience peace, and Nalathi to experience holistic well-being. In other words, the Bodo associate peacefulness, harmony, and holistic well-being with the fundamental principles of personal and social life, of the natural order, and of the cosmos thus the foundational normative values for the quality of their personal and social life. In the Bodo context, customary traditions and normative ethos are based on the conviction that it is in the best interest of the individual to promote the good of all. This means that their awakening was sparked by the belief that there are principles and normative prescriptions within the heritage that have constitutive power. The term "constitutive" is defined as having the power to establish or give organized existence to what is prescribed if the principles are adhered to.

Indigenous movements sparking an awakening are usually generated by two things: the desire for freedom and the endeavor to exercise the necessary power to achieve the goal. Freedom is defined as the ability of a cultural group to live in accordance with "The various things it values doing or being" as well as the things the cultural group believes will enhance its well-being and flourishing (Sen, 1999, p. 75). Power is the ability to effectively manage the challenges and obstacles the social group is confronted with in their pursuit of freedom (Weber, 1964, p. 152). This was certainly the case in regards to the peasant movement of Assam's during India's freedom movement, which historical records indicate was partially sparked by the insistence of the indigenous people in Assam to live in accordance with their cultural values and principles. The earliest freedom movements of the region were inspired by a rallying cry for Satyagrahi/Satyagraha, "Uphold what is personally and socially uplifting, and you will get Swaraj" (i.e., self-governance or self-rule) (Miller, 2023, pp. 24-25; Guha, 1977, "*Planter-raj To Swaraj*" for a detailed account of the peasant movement in the region, which was based on their traditional notion of participatory governance). In short, the movement was sparked by the sentiments of the indigenous people and their desire to experience what they regarded as goodness. They believed that the constitutive power of Bodo principles derives from the fact that they prescribe a means by which the cultural group can maximize the good they experience in psychological, socio-cultural, eco-aesthetic, and economic terms. Goodness is a basic aim that its social action attempts to realize because "All socio-political action has in itself a directedness towards knowledge of the good: of the good life, or the good society" (Strauss, 1957, p. 343).

The Bodo awakening reached a height when top-down strategies for transforming traditional practices into those that fit the modernization economic development scheme—which was planned by international experts—failed to take cultural values and identity into consideration. The failure to include indigenous knowledge and the relationship that indigenous people have with their heritage, and with their environment resulted in developmental strategies that promised independence and prosperity, often causing conflict and the devastation of the environment (Wallerstein, 2007, pp. 434-435; Mirovitskaya & Ascher, 2014, p. 1; Redclift, 1993, p. 3; Costanza et al., 2007, p. 268). Thus, it resulted in an approach to governance that failed to establish a social-

economic strategy that “makes justice and peace possible”, plus it resulted in economic, environmental, and climate crises that prompted an increase in migrations, interethnic clashes, and conflict (Shiva, 2014, p. 13). The problem of the prior paradigm can be described as confusing means and ends. In the prior paradigm, the domination of nature and the application of industry and technology toward generating wealth were regarded as the end within itself, not as a strategy for improving the well-being of indigenous people. For 70% of India’s rural agricultural population,

Economic prosperity is no more than one of the means to enriching the lives of people. It is a foundational confusion to give it the status of an end. Secondly, even as a means, merely enhancing average economic opulence can be quite inefficient in the pursuit of the really valuable ends. (Sen, 1989, pp. 41-42)

Consequently, with sustainability superseding the economic development paradigm, strategists realized that the problem can be solved in a way compatible with micro-level cultural values and that benefit stakeholders at the local, regional, national, and international levels by integrating indigenous knowledge with the UN’s sustainability strategies. This created a:

growing awareness and understanding in scientific research of the role and benefits that indigenous knowledge systems bring to the science, education and practice of managing the natural environment, and this inclusion is promoting more respectful and equal decision-making as well as new perspectives on sustainability meanings and concepts. (Marshall, 2020, p. 17)

The most progressive contemporary thinkers have recently begun to endorse such a view to future planning. In fact, the United Nations has adopted a more inclusive approach to planning a sustainable and peaceful future (partially based on the ideas of Indian-born Nobel Prize Winner Amartya Sen’s perspective on *Development as Freedom* and his capability theory) but also in recognition of the viability of applying indigenous knowledge to sustainability planning, of the right to self-determination of indigenous people, and, as well, recognition of the need to be inclusive of culture in planning for a particular social context. Contemporary social science research also supports the claim that indigenous knowledge is congruent with state-of-the-art strategies for freedom, social flourishing, participatory governance, and the principles of liberal democracy. Some of the data of contemporary social scientists is derived from an exploratory study of Northeast cultural literature, the current literature promoting participatory governance, and that proposing the co-creation of social reality. Consequently, the UN adopted the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. The covenant states its agreement with “The right of self-determination and that by virtue of that right indigenous cultures can freely determine their political status and freely pursue economic and cultural development” (UN, 1976, p. 1).

Consequently, Bodo people began to realize the freedom they have to transform their heritage, and its constitutive principles, and the value inherent in their cultural worldview, into a futuristic model of sustainable well-being and prosperity. In addition, they have the insight to discern how to exercise the power to overcome the obstacles. By applying Bodo traditional approaches to social formation—which is compatible with state-of-the-art strategies for participatory governance and increasing social capital—Bodo people can live in a futuristic-type peace zone that is exempt from conflict, operate on the basis of public policy and authority that is compatible with a contemporary model of good governance, and resolve what heretofore was the seeming incompatibility of the interests of multi-level stakeholders. As a matter of social planning, improving performance in ways that ensure sustainable flourishing and growth requires two ways of dealing with the issues of value (as in what

sustainability aims to achieve), values (as in what instrumental means determine how to achieve what is valued), and evaluative judgment. First is a descriptive analysis of the value that Bodo society aims to achieve by describing it in normative/prescriptive terms and, as well, explaining what justifies the reasoning for such normative claims. This provides normative guidance for future planning and establishes the basis for the *end value* desired. With this in place, Bodo cultural and economic planners can “diagnose value conflicts, assess policies (actual and possible), and validate or refute valuations placed on development performance” (Goulet, 1997, p. 1168). Second is matching the value orientation with practical economic commitments to ensure that they co-create sustainability strategies based on Bodo cultural artifacts, eco-innovations, and strategies for integrating advances in science and technology with its heritage.

Bathou, System Science, and Natural Law

That which is above is like that which is below, and that which is below is like to that which is above. As all things are from one, by mediation of a single one, so all things were born from this one reality. (The Emerald Tablet, 2018, pp. 314-315)

There are numerous Bodo scholars who provide a descriptive analysis of Bodo folk traditions and their continued significance for contemporary life. This includes an explanation of Bathou and its importance in shaping “The entire pattern of Bodo folk customs, rituals, and other traditions that help Bodo people to claim a distinct identity for themselves” (Brahma & Sharma, 2023, p. 100). Bathou continues to be an important aspect of the Bodo worldview and way of life. The word “Bathou” holds composite meanings that range from the essence of being, the supreme soul, the force that is responsible for creation, a framework for viewing the relational dynamics of the basic elements of existence, deep insight into the nature of things, and a philosophy of life (i.e., five basic principles or natural laws for organizing one’s way of life). “The etymology of the word Bathou is derived from the two root words in Bodo language—Ba means five and thou which means a deep thought or philosophy” (Brahma & Sharma, 2023, p. 100). Bathou consists of five principles or elements. These are Bar (air), Dwi (water), Hah (earth), Orr (fire), and Ukhrang (sky/cosmos). Because it is also indicative of different parts of the human organism, there are aspects that deal with holistic well-being and good health (as is true in other traditions that refer to the elements to explain the nature of existence). Bathou is related to power, visionary insight, and wisdom/knowledge, as well as symbolizing the five vital elements of nature. Hence, Bathou represents a microcosmic framework that portrays “The larger cosmos. It reflects the source of life that interconnects the objects of the entire universe. From this perspective, the micro-center [i.e., a particular Bodo context] is connected to and sustained by cosmic force” (Pathak & Brahma, 2025, p. 61).

However, the point is that very few scholars (if any) explain the significance and relevance of the Bodo cultural worldview in terms of how it compares to or on the basis of contemporary science and philosophy. This is especially important to Bodo scholars because the academic community often regards indigenous knowledge as necessarily superseded first by philosophy and later by science. Therefore, it is especially important as Bodo scholars will be called on to address the critique of scientists and technologists regarding the adequacy of Bodo cultural knowledge as a basis for future planning. This means that it is extremely important, for the sake of advancing the culture and its people, that Bodo scholars are prepared to dialogue with contemporary scholars to explain the scientific relevance of the deep insight provided by Bathou (e.g., in terms of cosmology, ontology, social theory, political science, and good governance plus health, healing, medicine, peace building and conflict reduction, and sustainability). In this respect, Bodo centers of higher education and Bodoland become significant

centers for generating knowledge regarding how to blend the deep insight and higher-order values of the past with the best foresight for planning the future. The Constructivist-type engagement would demonstrate that Bathou provides a form of reliable knowledge that is equal to some of the world's most respected wisdom traditions, natural sciences, perennial philosophies, social sciences, ethics, plus theories of natural law and political philosophy. It is incumbent on Bodo scholars to demonstrate how Bodo's constitutive principles can lead its people into the best of all possible futures.

Bukul Chandra Basumatary, a renowned Bodo historian, points out, in the introductory section of his book *Bathou and Religious Transitions of the Bodos* (2018), that Bathou predates Buddhism. This means that Bodo beliefs date back into the depths of antiquity and reflect indigenous views on the nature of existence that are shared with other traditions around the world. In fact, viewpoints on the nature and interactions of the elements are expressed in the worldview of a number of cultures and ancient traditional belief systems (Brahma & Sharma, 2023, p. 102). In this respect, Bathou is found to have significance that is acknowledged by the belief systems of a number of contemporary cultures in the East and West because it encompasses the three main knowledge systems (e.g., cultural, philosophical, and scientific). In addition, what for many scholars of science and philosophy has been "Inexplicable and incomprehensible, is made comprehensible through the combination of five basic elements, objects, or ideas" (Brahma & Sharma, 2023, p. 101). This is because the deep insight of Bathou reflects a clear understanding of the structure and nature of existence. This makes it far more than a belief system, but a highly reliable system of knowledge that is relevant for facing and effectively managing the challenges of today and the future.

As is true with many of the other cultural, scientific, and philosophical traditions that conceptualize the five elements, Bathou explains that there was initially a creative force that manifested as a polarity (Mwmsinsi Bwrai and Mwmsinsi Burwi—representing the polarity of male and female or the nature of the fundamental structural properties of existence—e.g., the plus-minus charge used to describe the atom, for example). However, even though they referred to polarity, they thought of existence as arising from an underlying unity, which they understood as each substance in existence is essentially tied in a relational bond. This means that underlying polarity is a force that establishes a complementary relationship between the pairs. The underlying unity (or creative force) that gives rise to polarity also shapes the various things that are manifested as substances, which are composed of the fundamental elements of existence. This shapes the pattern and nature of phenomenal reality. Human behavior (as a result of self-cultivation) and social affairs should be regulated in a way that maintains harmony with this dynamic underlying force. In this way, the polarities of existence (night-day, summer-winter, etc.) and the impact of the elements can be experienced in harmony. That is to say that with self-cultivation, individuals perceive and experience natural, personal, and social activity as a harmonious pattern and, as well, they sense that phenomenal reality reflects the unifying force that shapes the nature of existence.

"According to the Bodo belief system, the creation of the world and of life depend on the interactions of the 'five' fundamental elements" (Pathak & Brahma, 2025, p. 61). Understanding their pattern of relations, interactions, and organization is the key to understanding the nature of existence. Therefore, contemporary scientists who emphasize the interconnected web of existence confirm the Bathou belief claim that there is a correspondence between the elements of existence and the cosmic whole that the components are a part of (Capra, 1996, pp. 26-27). From the Bathou perspective, a system means an integrated whole whose elements interact in relationships that shape the larger whole.

Hence, Bathou is a microcosmic element representing the larger cosmos, or *cosmophany*. There is nothing in isolation. Nature, planets, stars, air, water, and space are all part of this central force. Human relations with this higher cosmos are established through the consecrated altar or *hierophany*. (Pathak & Brahma, 2025, p. 61)

As was true with other belief systems where conceptualizations of the elements play an important role in their worldview, Bathou is based on the assertion “That there is a correspondence between the laws and phenomena of the various planes of existence” (Three Initiates, 2016, p. 28). In other words, they share a belief in the validity of the correspondence claim of the ancient aphorism, “As above, same below”.

Among the scientists who offer theories regarding the elements, there is no doubt that the element theory has authority. The elements were the foundations of physical theory. If your theory of elements is sound, then the superstructure you built on its basis—the detailed explanations of particular natural phenomena—was well grounded. (Lloyd & Sivin, 2002, p. 150, 153)

That is to say, the cultures, sciences, and philosophies that refer to the five elements use it as a framework for describing the nature of systems (cosmological systems, the various aspects of nature’s ecosystem, specific parts of the human body, social systems, and government—i.e., government meaning the principles regulating a social system). In contemporary science, the interactions and relationships expressed in conceptualizations of the five elements represent the basic law of complex systems, thus “They say something resonant about how we interact with the world and about the effect that matter has on us.” (Ball, 2002, p. 20). Thus, contemporary science acknowledges the depth of insight evident in indigenous conceptualizations of the elements even though they regard conceptualizations of the elements as protoscience. However, contemporary science concurs with the claim of Bathou that all living organisms are ultimately made of elements that are also the components of inorganic matter, thus the laws governing the relationship between the elements apply to biology, physics, and chemistry. In the Bodo worldview, these natural laws are regarded as the principles underlying how systems work. Adherence to these principles can also be thought of as the path to achieving the highest good, or, in other words, the highest level of self-cultivation, or for how Bodo people can achieve the highest level of quality of social life.

Therefore, despite being regarded as a protoscience the five elements remain relevant because of their connection with the earliest sciences (e.g., alchemy, medicine, social science theory, environmentalism, natural philosophies, atomic theory, and the ancient studies of astrology). Most recently, there is an increased interest in the connection between the elements and the relational turn in the sciences (both natural and social sciences) (Kasper, 2013, pp. 85-86). From the perspective of relationality, the elements represent the aspect of existence that promotes interdependence, mutuality, and balance. In other words, it doesn’t make sense to talk about discrete individual entities that exist independent of a dynamic relationship with the elements that cause them to move, exist in a state of flux, exist in a process of becoming, and change.

The imagery most often employed in speaking of transactions is accordingly those of complex joint activity, in which it makes no sense to envision constituent elements apart from the flows within which they are involved (and vice versa). By the same token, [entities] are empty abstractions apart from the several elements of which they are composed. (Emirbayer, 1997, p. 287, 289)

In this respect, a study of the five elements provides insight into how things can form a system that exists in relationships of mutuality and reciprocity, as well as how systems can avoid decline and dissipation.

In fact, the five elements continue to be relevant to developments in physics (i.e., the study of basic elementary particles), medicine, and recent research in the Primo Vascular System. In contemporary quantum

physics, the five elements represent the relational aspect of reality (including how contemporary science understands or explains cosmology and ontology).

In relational quantum mechanics, this principle is the foundation of the ontology of the theory: the elements of reality, the facts, are aspects of a relationship and take place in interactions. The ontological priority of the interactions invests the whole structure of what we call reality. (Vidotto, 2022, p. 166)

Contemporary scholars are also interested in the use of the five elements principles in medicine. In this approach to holistic well-being, there is a:

correspondence between the cosmos and the body that can be expressed by means of several sets of emblems, which are in agreement with one another and can be used conjointly. The cosmos-body correspondence is mainly the focus of the system of the five elements, which essentially consists in classifying different macrocosmic, microcosmic, numerical, and other items in a fivefold pattern so that each item may be related to the others. (Pregadio, 2021, p. 104)

Finally, it is a Bodo belief that conceptualizations of the five elements are also expressions of the principles of the laws of nature. Natural law is based on the belief that the underlying unity that gives rise to polarity ultimately transforms into the elements, which can have an enabling or constraining impact on human affairs. As in many other cultural, philosophical, and scientific descriptions of natural law, Bodo shares the conviction that natural law is inherent to the nature of existence and applies universally; thus, the Bodo believe that societal laws should be consistent with natural law. In other words, Bathou is also indicative of the rules that govern how the cosmos operates within the context of the five natural phases, or elements. That is to say that an important aspect of the composite meaning of Bathou is “Natural laws to guide Bodo ways of life” (Pathak & Brahma, 2025, p. 61). Therefore, the laws shaping the nature of existence, which are ordained by Higher Authority, are explained and put into effect by the practice of Bathou. Natural law is equated with the five basic principles in that they explain the appropriate relationship or interaction between things. Acting in accordance with or on the basis of natural law is the means by which individual behaviors and the activities of social groups are in harmony with cosmic principles (for example, it is a means of aligning *jiwa*—or individual and collective human behavior) with *sijou* (the Essence of Being). Natural law calls for individuals and social groups to act in harmony with the natural flow of existence.

The effects of natural law influence all things; thus, by attuning ourselves to the cosmic flow that we experience as the patterns of nature, we put ourselves on the path of greater happiness and success. In other words, natural law involves the principles that explain how the interactions of the elements can work in the favor of individuals and social groups, which means it explains how to align personal and social behavior with the natural flow of things. Knowledge of how to align behavior with natural law enables individuals and social groups to be fortunate (Aristotle, 2013, p. 180). Therefore, natural law, in the Bathou tradition, is an explanation of how individuals and social groups can experience good fortune (i.e., *mainau*—i.e., to gain personal and social fortune/prosperity, the harvest’s bounty, or, enjoying the feeling of being fortunate or being blessed).

Natural law is believed to be based on principles that have a type of constitutive power, which can elevate the human experience; thus, governments should support, not inhibit, the right to live in accordance with natural rights. By aligning their lives with their interpretation of natural law, the Bodo people demonstrate respect for the human rights of each individual and the accompanying sense of mutual support” (Nazary & Miller, 2023, p. 276). This school of thought justifies the claim that there is a natural equality of all people. Natural law is a theory of individual and social moral conduct, and it provides a blueprint for social justice. “In the case of the Bodo, this

signifies the conviction that adherence to the forces that shape the natural order, or natural law, is fundamental to the realization of their natural rights. These forces include the natural elements of Hailong, Agrang, Khwila, Sanjabwrllee, and Rajkhumbree. Therefore, natural law addresses the fundamental principles of social formation, social psychology, governance, and political sociology, which involves delving into the deepest and innermost core of political philosophy, the Philosophy of Science, and the Philosophy of Social Science” (Miller, 2025, p. 18). Bodo scholars who engage in the academic dialogue regarding natural law address issues that are important to their struggle for self-determination (e.g., the human rights discourse, human development, social development and improving the quality of life, living in accordance with the fundamental principles of justice, and understanding what it takes to have a harmonious relationship with the forces shaping the natural order) (Miller, 2025, p. 14).

Conclusion

The earliest historical records of the Bodo, dating back to the initial stages of civilization, refer to them as a distinct tribal group living in the Brahmaputra Valley region of the eastern slopes of the Himalayas Mountains. The earliest references describe them as a non-Brahmanical “Oral society rich in oral traditions” (Boro, 2015, p. 1). However, there were numerous factors that threatened to disrupt the existence of the Bodo people in the context they settled in and claimed as their homeland. Yet, despite constant and ongoing impositions “The Bodo have maintained their distinctive identity through the ages” (Boro, 2015, pp. 1-3). That is to say that although Bodo people have, for millennia, faced challenges and impositions from outside forces, Bodo culture has not only been able to survive but to thrive because its worldview prescribes how to best engage the forces they are confronted with in reality. The secret to the Bodo success in achieving their community goals has always been the level of inner resilience they have been able to maintain despite their struggles (Choudhury & Basumatary, 2022, p. 23). Consequently, “The Bodo community is now on the verge of entering into a new era of social and economic development, keeping their ethnic identity intact” (Boro, 2015, p. 1). In fact, a careful analysis of the Bodo worldview reveals that it is not merely the unique belief system of a tribal community. The Bodo belief system reflects the type of insight into the nature of existence that proves to be both comparable to and relevant to contemporary sciences (both natural and social).

The basic belief of the Bodo is that good fortune and experiencing the highest good can be achieved by living in accordance with the five principles. These principles are morally interpreted as living in harmony with the precepts of Bathou. “Bathou is located in the Bodo indigenous landscape that relies on the organic growth of the cosmic whole, a conceptual framework that takes into its fold an eco-centric worldview” that could contribute much to the science of future planning (Pathak & Brahma, 2025, p. 49). When analyzing Bathou through the lens of the history of science and philosophy, it becomes clear that the Bodo cultural worldview represents far more than an indigenous belief system. “In the present times, with the genesis of new styles of performance, Bathou is aligned not only to indigenous knowledge systems but also to technology and political ecology” (Pathak & Brahma, 2025, p. 65). This puts Bodo scholars in the position of engaging in a strategic partnership with the world’s scientific community that would significantly contribute to a discourse on the best way to plan for a sustainable future.

The Bodo worldview is relevant to addressing not only its own challenges imposed by external forces, but in helping other indigenous cultures and humanity as a whole to deal with challenges to a sustainable future. Inherent in the Bodo cultural worldview are beliefs, principles, and practices regarding natural rights, social

justice, and equality, which they declare are “Derived from the nature of existence itself” (Narzary & Miller, 2023, p. 132). Therefore, the Bodo worldview is a good example of the claim made by contemporary scholars that there are aspects of some indigenous traditions that are culturally and contextually specific but apply as a pan-humanly intelligible knowledge system (Yü, 2017, p. 121). Thus, it is apparent that the Bodo cultural knowledge system is rooted in a viable source of reliable knowledge that could make valuable contributions to planning for future personal and social well-being.

Bodo scholars and scientists play a role in addressing the significance of indigenous knowledge systems and their relevance to science, technology, politics, and planning a sustainable future for humanity. This means future planning that contributes to development in multiple dimensions—not just in terms of GDP but human, social, and sustainable development, which includes quality of life, levels of peacefulness, life satisfaction, and happiness.

The modern world is only beginning to recognize that many indigenous modes of being preserved living knowledge that might prove to be invaluable in the current era confronted with problems that challenge the sustainability of sentient flourishing, ecological integrity, environmental health, and interspecies ethics. (Yü, 2017, p. 120)

The Bodo worldview is based on systems science view of existence, which proposes that the cosmic, natural, and social worlds are interconnected and reflect systems that operate on the basis of the same principle(s). Therefore, the Bodo believe that there is a complementary connection between the laws of existence, the principles of social justice and harmony, and those promoting civic virtue. These laws of nature and of existence are called natural law. Contemporary scholars and political philosophers describe natural law as “The concern to find a basis for moral life” (Haakonssen, 2006, p. 251). Indeed, the fact is that all the sciences are invoked to this purpose—for at issue is the basis for a sustainable and peaceful world. Therefore, what is at issue is the need to refer to a knowledge system that enables humanity to achieve this goal.

This innovative strategy allows the indigenous people to collaborate with stakeholders at the local, national, and international levels to create an operational model inspired by the vision of India’s foundational cultural values and principles. In doing so, the values and principles of the indigenous people once again become a unifying force, challenging the idea that they are in opposition to progress. Instead, indigenous communities and public authorities jointly confront challenges such as oppression, domination, gender discrimination, injustice, and the violation of human rights. By adopting this approach to affirm their self-determination, they implement a strategy that empowers their community members to achieve the greatest possible good through organized social action, leading to enduring happiness and social well-being (Aristotle, 1998, pp. 192-193; Cicero, 2004, pp. 38-43, 83-86; Confucius, 2005, p. 12).

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