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# Guardians of Taste: Secrecy, Ritual, and Informal Intellectual Property in Bodo Traditional Food Knowledge”

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**ABSTRACT**

**While formal intellectual property (IP) regimes struggle to protect Indigenous knowledge, many communities like the Bodos of Assam have developed sophisticated informal IP systems rooted in secrecy, ritual, and custodianship. This article examines how Bodo food-related knowledge—especially concerning herbal medicine, fermentation (e.g., Jumai rice beer), and ritual cuisine—is safeguarded through culturally embedded protocols rather than legal instruments. Based on Maneswar Baro’s ethnographic findings, the study reveals that knowledge transmission is often restricted to initiated disciples (Bej or Sela), governed by taboos, and encoded in ceremonial performances (e.g., Phandra death rites, Hathasuni marriage). The paper introduces the concept of “ritualized secrecy” as a dynamic, community-enforced mechanism that prevents misappropriation while ensuring intergenerational continuity. It contrasts this with Western IP paradigms that prioritize disclosure and commodification, arguing that Bodo practices offer an alternative model of knowledge stewardship aligned with cultural integrity. The article concludes by proposing a sui generis legal framework that respects customary norms while enabling ethical benefit-sharing—particularly urgent in an era of biopiracy and culinary appropriation.**

**Keywords: Traditional knowledge protection, informal intellectual property, ritual secrecy, Bodo food heritage, Jumai, Indigenous custodianship, sui generis legislation**

## INTRODUCTION

In the global discourse on intellectual property, Indigenous knowledge systems are often rendered invisible—or worse, extracted and patented without consent. Yet, long before the advent of copyright, trademarks, or patents, many Indigenous communities developed their own robust systems for protecting knowledge. Among the Bodo people of Assam, Northeast India, such systems are not codified in legal statutes but are woven into the fabric of ritual, secrecy, and social obligation. This article argues that Bodo food knowledge—encompassing fermentation techniques, medicinal plant use, and ceremonial cuisine—is protected not by formal law but by what we term ritualized secrecy: a culturally embedded, intergenerational protocol that functions as an informal intellectual property (IP) regime.

Drawing on Maneswar Baro’s Ph.D. thesis A Study on Food Habits and Traditional Knowledge System of the Bodos (2021), this paper demonstrates how knowledge about food and healing is transmitted selectively, encoded in performance, and guarded through spiritual and social sanctions. Unlike Western IP, which incentivizes disclosure in exchange for temporary monopoly rights, Bodo knowledge systems thrive on controlled access, oral transmission, and ritual validation. In an age of biopiracy—where corporations patent turmeric, neem, and basmati rice derived from Indigenous knowledge—understanding such informal systems is not merely academic; it is essential for ethical and legal reform.

### 2. Theoretical Framework: Beyond Formal IP

Formal intellectual property law, as codified in the TRIPS Agreement and national statutes, is ill-suited to protect collective, intergenerational, and spiritually embedded knowledge. As Mauro and Hardison (2000) note, Indigenous knowledge is often "non-reductive, holistic, and inseparable from cultural identity"—qualities that defy the atomized, inventor-centric logic of patent law.

In contrast, scholars like Brush (1993) and Posey (1996) have documented "informal IP-like" systems among Indigenous communities, where knowledge is protected through social norms, initiation rites, and spiritual taboos. In Northeast India, these systems are particularly pronounced. As Baro (2021, p. 24) observes, "In North-East India there are informal Intellectual Properties like management protecting certain subject matter in the field of traditional medicinal herbs."

This paper builds on this literature by introducing ritualized secrecy as a key mechanism of knowledge protection among the Bodos—a concept that captures the fusion of spiritual belief, social control, and epistemic gatekeeping.

3. Secrecy as Strategy: Transmission Protocols Among Bodo Healers and Cooks

Among the Bodos, food and medicinal knowledge is not public domain; it is held by designated custodians—often called Oja (medicine man), Bej, or Sela (disciple). As Baro documents, "The knowledge of medicine and the use of herbal medicines are transmitted through the sela or bej whom the Oja teaches practically in the field of cure and prevention of ailments" (p. 25).

**Transmission is highly selective:**

Only those deemed morally and spiritually fit are initiated.
Knowledge is imparted through apprenticeship, not texts.
Disciples must observe strict behavioral codes (e.g., abstaining from certain foods, maintaining celibacy during training).

For example, the preparation of Emao—the herbal starter cake used to ferment Jumai (rice beer)—involves over a dozen secret botanical ingredients, including Mwkhwna flowers, Anarash (pineapple) leaves, and Agarcitha roots (p. 177). The exact proportions and processing methods are known only to initiated Ojas and are never disclosed publicly. As one elder informant explained, "If the secret is told to outsiders, the Jumai will turn sour and bring misfortune" (Baro, 2021, p. 178).

This is not mere superstition; it is a functional IP strategy. By embedding efficacy in secrecy, the community ensures that only legitimate practitioners can produce authentic Jumai, preserving both quality and cultural authority.

## 4. Ritual as Repository: Food Knowledge in Ceremonial Contexts

Bodo food knowledge is not stored in books but enacted in rituals. Three key ceremonies illustrate this:

### 4.1. Hathasuni Marriage and Onla Khari

In traditional Bodo weddings, the bride must prepare Onla Khari—a rice-powder curry with chicken—without tasting or seasoning it. As Baro notes, "No taste of curry is examined at the time of cooking… The bride is treated as god for the bridegroom" (p. 82). The recipe's success is seen as a test of her virtue and culinary inheritance. The knowledge is thus validated not through documentation but through ritual performance.

### 4.2. Phandra Death Rites and Narzi

Narzi—dried jute leaves—is central to Phandra, the post-funeral ceremony. It is fried with pig intestine and distributed to sever ties between the living and the deceased. Baro records the proverb: "A family who has no narzi is dishonoured in society" (p. 44). The preparation method—soaking to reduce bitterness, specific frying techniques—is passed down matrilineally and never shared outside the kin group.

### 4.3. Bwisagu New Year and Sat Tithi Mwigong Janai

On the seventh day of Bwisagu, Bodo women collect seven wild vegetables (e.g., Dingkhia, Maisundri, Khungkha) believed to confer immunity for the year. The selection criteria—medicinal potency, seasonal availability, ritual purity—are transmitted orally during foraging. As Baro writes, "They may be daushrem, tharai gwrlwi, burwi thokhon… They believe that vegetables eating on the day give them great immunize value" (p. 109).

In each case, food knowledge is inseparable from ritual context—making extraction by outsiders not only unethical but epistemologically incoherent.

### 5. Case Studies: Embodied Knowledge in Practice

#### 5.1. Emao: The Secret of Fermentation

Emao is more than a fermentation starter; it is a pharmacopoeia. Ingredients like Khanthal (jackfruit) bark and Rakheb bifang (a wild vine) are chosen for their antimicrobial and flavor-enhancing properties. The cake is dried, stored, and reused—each batch carrying microbial terroir akin to sourdough cultures. Yet, as Baro emphasizes, "The verbal tradition transmitted among them is the secondary source to gather knowledge of this" (p. 25). No written recipes exist; efficacy is proven through ritual outcomes (e.g., successful Jumai at Kherai Puja).

#### 5.2. Sithorni Bori: A Hundred-and-One Herbs

Sithorni Bori is a polyherbal remedy for pneumonia, made from over 100 wild plants, including Buri thokhon, Daosri athing, and Manimuni. Its preparation is restricted to elder women healers, who gather ingredients during specific lunar phases. The knowledge is "guarded secret of certain families" (p. 22), shared only with trusted daughters or nieces.

#### 5.3. Onla Khari: The Bride's Culinary Trial

The Onla Khari recipe—rice powder, water, chicken, no spices—appears simple but is notoriously difficult to perfect. As Baro notes, "Many new cooks from the community feel tough to prepare this curry" (p. 81). Its mastery signals cultural competence, making it a rite of passage rather than a mere recipe.

### 6. Tensions with Modernity: Tourism, Commercialization, and Cultural Erosion

Despite their resilience, Bodo knowledge systems face mounting pressures:

Commercialization: Urban restaurants now serve "Bodo pork curry" and "fermented bamboo shoot," often prepared without traditional methods or respect for ritual context.

Tourism: Cultural performances of Bwisagu sometimes reduce sacred foods to photo opportunities, divorcing them from their cosmological meaning.

Youth Disengagement: Younger generations, educated in mainstream schools, often lack interest in learning secret recipes, viewing them as "backward."

As elder Thimfri Boro lamented, "Earlier, every home had narzi. Now, many don't even know how to cook onla khari" (Baro, 2021, p. 192). Without active intergenerational transmission, ritualized secrecy risks becoming silence.

7. Policy Implications: Designing Culturally Grounded Legal Safeguards

Formal IP law cannot—and should not—replace Bodo knowledge systems. Instead, we propose a sui generis framework that:

Recognizes customary custodianship: Legally affirm the Oja, Bej, and elder women as knowledge holders.

Requires prior informed consent (PIC): Modeled on Peru's Ley No. 27811, any commercial use of Bodo food knowledge must obtain community consent.

Protects ritual contexts: Prohibit the use of sacred foods (e.g., Narzi, Khungkha) in disrespectful or decontextualized settings.

Supports community documentation: Fund Bodo-led ethnobotanical archives, using audio-visual media to preserve oral transmission without violating secrecy norms.

Such a framework would align with India's Biological Diversity Act (2002) and the Nagoya Protocol, while respecting the Bodo principle that "knowledge is sacred, not a commodity" (Baro, 2021, p. 23).

## CONCLUSION

The Bodo people's informal IP system—rooted in ritualized secrecy—offers a powerful alternative to the extractive logic of global intellectual property. Their food knowledge is not "open source" but relationally held: protected by taboos, validated by ceremony, and transmitted through trust. In defending this system, we do not merely preserve recipes; we uphold a worldview in which knowledge, ecology, and spirituality are inseparable. As biopiracy and cultural appropriation accelerate, the world has much to learn from the guardians of taste.

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