

Semiotics and Indigenous Performance: A Barthesian Analysis of Bohua/Bohuwa Dance among the Sonowal Kacharis

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Abstract

This paper examines the Bohua dance of the Sonowal Kachari tribe as a complex semiotic and performative system that encodes cultural identity, myth, and ritual practice. Drawing on the ethnographic account, the study employs the theoretical frameworks of Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles Sanders Peirce, and Roland Barthes to analyze the dance as a multilayered system of signification. It further integrates performance theory through the works of Richard Schechner and Victor Turner to explore the embodied, ritualistic, and liminal dimensions of the performance. The paper argues that Bohua dance operates as a second-order semiotic system in which mythological narratives—particularly the story of Shiva, Sati, and Daksha—are transformed into naturalized cultural meanings. Through gesture, costume, music, and ritual practices, the dance constructs a symbolic framework that communicates values of renewal, purification, and communal cohesion. The study also highlights the role of repetition and “restored behavior” in preserving cultural memory, as well as the participatory role of the audience in interpreting and sustaining meaning. By situating Bohua dance within both semiotic and performance-theoretical paradigms, this paper demonstrates that indigenous performance traditions function as dynamic sites of meaning-making rather than static cultural artifacts. It underscores the importance of such traditions in maintaining cultural continuity and identity in the face of social and historical transformations.

Keywords: Semiotics, Bohua Dance, Sonowal Kachari Tribe, Myth and Signification, Cultural Identity

Introduction

The Sonowal Kacharis are one of the prominent indigenous communities of Assam, belonging to the larger Bodo-Kachari ethnic group, which forms an important part of the Tibeto-Burman linguistic and cultural family of Northeast India. Historically associated with regions such as Dibrugarh, Lakhimpur, and parts of Upper Assam, the Sonowal Kacharis have maintained a distinct socio-cultural identity shaped by their traditions, rituals, and close relationship with nature. The term “Sonowal” is often linked to the traditional occupation of gold-washing (*son* meaning gold), which was once practiced by members of the community. Over time, however, their economic life has become predominantly agrarian, with agriculture

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forming the backbone of their livelihood and social organization. Despite these transformations, the community has preserved a strong sense of cultural continuity through its festivals, oral traditions, and ritual practices.

Religiously, the Sonowal Kacharis exhibit a syncretic belief system that combines elements of indigenous faith with broader Hindu traditions. They primarily worship Lord Shiva, locally known as Bathou or Khring Raja Baithow, while also incorporating Vaishnavite influences in certain practices. This coexistence of belief systems reflects the dynamic and adaptive nature of their cultural identity. The social life of the Sonowal Kacharis is deeply embedded in communal rituals and festivals, which function as important sites of cultural expression and cohesion. Among these, the Bohua dance holds a central place, symbolizing renewal, purification, and collective identity. Such performative traditions not only reinforce social bonds but also serve as repositories of cultural knowledge, transmitted orally and through embodied practices across generations.

In the contemporary context, the Sonowal Kacharis face challenges related to cultural preservation and modernization. However, their continued engagement with traditional practices demonstrates a resilient commitment to maintaining their heritage. Understanding the Sonowal Kacharis, therefore, requires an appreciation of their historical roots, cultural practices, and the evolving dynamics of identity within a rapidly changing socio-cultural landscape. Indigenous performance traditions offer rich sites for the study of semiotics, as they encode cultural meanings through embodied practices, ritual symbolism, and communal participation. Among such traditions, the Bohua/Bohuwa dance of the Sonowal Kachari tribe of Assam stands out as a compelling example of how performance functions as a system of signs. Rooted in mythological narratives associated with Lord Shiva, the Bohua dance is not merely an aesthetic form but a ritual practice that communicates cultural values, cosmological beliefs, and social norms.

The Bohua dance is believed to have its origins in ancient traditions. Among the Sonowal Kacharis, Lord Shiva, also known as Khring Raja Baithow, is revered as the principal deity (Sonowal). According to narratives found in the *Bhagavata Purana* and other Puranic texts, Daksha, the son of Lord Brahma, ruled over the three worlds (Tagare 212). His youngest daughter, Sati, whom he deeply cherished, fell in love with Lord Shiva during her youth. However, Daksha disapproved of Shiva as a suitable match, as he was ascetic, possessed no material wealth, lived unclothed, and was associated with spirits and supernatural beings (Dutt 145).

Despite his reluctance, Daksha was compelled by Lord Brahma to consent to the marriage, and Sati was eventually wed to Shiva (Tagare 215). At a later time, Shiva visited Daksha's court accompanied by other guests. When Daksha arrived, all present rose to greet him except Shiva. Feeling insulted by this perceived disrespect, Daksha resolved to take revenge (Dutt 148).

To fulfill this intent, Daksha organized a grand sacrificial ritual (Mahayajna), inviting various gods, celestial beings, kings, and queens, but deliberately excluding Shiva (Tagare 220). Upon learning of the event, Sati expressed her desire to attend despite Shiva's hesitation.

Eventually, Shiva permitted her to go. However, upon her arrival, Daksha publicly humiliated her. Unable to endure the insult, Sati immolated herself during the ritual (Dutt 152).

When Shiva came to know of Sati's death, his anger manifested in a destructive force. From a drop of his sweat emerged a powerful warrior, Birbhadra, who, under Shiva's command, destroyed the sacrificial ceremony and beheaded Daksha (Tagare 225). Subsequently, Daksha's wife pleaded with Shiva to restore her husband's life. Moved by her appeal, Shiva revived Daksha by replacing his head with that of a sacrificial goat (Dutt 156).

Following his resurrection, Daksha and his queen rejoiced, and all present acknowledged Shiva's supreme power. In commemoration of these events, the Sonowal Kacharis perform the Bohua dance as an act of devotion to Lord Shiva. The dance symbolizes renewal, purification, and the removal of negative forces, and has been preserved across generations as an important cultural and ritual tradition.

Research Objectives

The present study aims to examine the Bohua dance of the Sonowal Kachari tribe through a semiotic and performance-theoretical lens. The primary objective is to analyze Bohua dance as a system of signs in which meaning is constructed through gesture, costume, music, and ritual practices. By applying semiotic theories, the paper seeks to uncover how these performative elements function as signifiers that communicate deeper cultural and ideological meanings.

A second objective is to explore the role of myth—particularly the narrative of Shiva, Sati, and Daksha—in shaping the symbolic structure of the dance. Drawing on the theoretical insights of Roland Barthes, the study aims to demonstrate how myth operates as a second-order semiotic system that naturalizes cultural values and beliefs (Barthes 142).

Furthermore, the study intends to investigate the performative dimensions of Bohua dance by engaging with the works of Richard Schechner and Victor Turner. It examines how concepts such as “restored behavior” and “liminality” contribute to the understanding of Bohua as a ritual performance that facilitates cultural continuity (Schechner 35; Turner 44).

Finally, the paper aims to highlight the role of Bohua dance in the construction and preservation of Sonowal Kachari identity, demonstrating its significance as a living cultural practice in contemporary society.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretative research methodology, combining textual analysis with theoretical application. The primary source for the study is the ethnographic account which offers detailed insights into the cultural, ritualistic, and performative aspects of Bohua dance. The methodology involves a close reading of this ethnographic material, treating it as a cultural text that encodes multiple layers of meaning. Through this approach, the study identifies key elements of the performance—such as gesture, costume, music, and ritual—and analyzes them within a semiotic framework.

The research further employs a theoretical methodology by applying the concepts of Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles Sanders Peirce, and Roland Barthes to interpret the symbolic dimensions of the dance (Saussure 120; Peirce 247; Barthes 142). Saussure's structural model is used to analyze the relational nature of signs, while Peirce's triadic model helps classify the types of signs present in the performance. Barthes' concept of myth is applied to understand the ideological and cultural significance of the dance.

In addition, the study integrates performance theory by drawing on the works of Schechner and Turner. Schechner's concept of restored behavior is used to examine the repetitive and transmitted nature of the performance, while Turner's notion of liminality provides a framework for understanding the ritualistic transformation of participants and space (Schechner 38; Turner 47).

The methodology is thus interdisciplinary, combining semiotics, anthropology, and performance studies to provide a comprehensive analysis of Bohua dance.

Semiotics, the study of signs and signification, provides a critical framework for analyzing such performances. The foundational theories of Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce conceptualize meaning as emerging from systems of signs and their interpretation (Saussure 67; Peirce 228). Roland Barthes further extends this framework by introducing the concept of myth as a second-order semiotic system that naturalizes cultural meanings (Barthes, *Mythologies* 109). When applied to indigenous performance, semiotics enables us to understand how gestures, costumes, music, and ritual actions function as signifiers that convey deeper cultural and ideological meanings.

This paper examines the Bohua dance through a semiotic lens, drawing upon Barthesian theory and performance studies. It argues that Bohua operates as a multilayered system of signification in which mythological narratives are embodied and enacted, transforming cultural memory into lived experience. By analyzing the elements of gesture, costume, music, and ritual, the study demonstrates how Bohua dance functions as a dynamic process of meaning-making that sustains the cultural identity of the Sonowal Kachari community.

Theoretical Framework: Semiotics and Performance

Semiotics provides a foundational framework for understanding how meaning is constructed and communicated through signs. Saussure's structural model defines the sign as a relationship between the signifier and the signified, emphasizing that meaning arises from differences within a system rather than from inherent properties (Saussure 120). In performance, gestures, movements, and visual elements function as signifiers whose meanings are shaped by cultural conventions.

Peirce's triadic model expands this understanding by introducing the interpretant, highlighting the role of the observer in meaning-making (Peirce 247). His classification of signs into icons, indexes, and symbols is particularly useful in analyzing dance. In Bohua, movements may function iconically by imitating actions, indexically by expressing emotional states, and symbolically through culturally established meanings.

Roland Barthes' concept of myth further enriches semiotic analysis by demonstrating how cultural signs are transformed into naturalized meanings. Myth operates as a second-order semiotic system in which historical and cultural constructs appear as universal truths (Barthes, *Mythologies* 142). In the context of Bohua dance, mythological narratives associated with Lord Shiva function as such myths, reinforcing cultural values and beliefs.

Performance theory complements semiotics by emphasizing the embodied and experiential nature of performance. Richard Schechner's concept of "restored behavior" explains how performances are repeated and transmitted across generations, preserving cultural memory (Schechner 35). Victor Turner's notion of liminality highlights the transformative aspect of performance, where participants enter a symbolic space that transcends ordinary social structures (Turner 44). These theoretical perspectives provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing Bohua dance as both a semiotic and performative system.

Bohua Dance: Cultural and Mythological Context

The Bohua dance of the Sonowal Kachari tribe is deeply rooted in mythological narratives associated with Lord Shiva and the story of Daksha and Sati. According to traditional accounts, the dance commemorates the events surrounding Sati's self-immolation and the subsequent destruction of Daksha's sacrificial ritual by Shiva's divine power. This narrative serves as the foundational myth that informs the symbolic structure of the dance.

Within the Sonowal Kachari community, Lord Shiva is revered as the principal deity, often identified as Khring Raja Baithow. The Bohua dance is performed as an act of devotion, expressing reverence for Shiva's power and compassion. At the same time, the dance symbolizes themes of destruction and renewal, reflecting the cyclical nature of life and the triumph of divine justice over arrogance and wrongdoing.

From a semiotic perspective, this mythological narrative functions as a cultural code that informs the interpretation of the performance. The dance does not simply represent the story but re-enacts it, transforming narrative into embodied action. Through this process, the myth becomes a lived experience, reinforcing its significance within the cultural consciousness of the community.

Gesture and Movement as Semiotic Systems

Gesture and movement constitute the primary semiotic elements of Bohua dance. The body of the performer serves as the central medium of signification, conveying meaning through stylized actions and expressions. These movements are not arbitrary but are shaped by cultural conventions that assign specific meanings to particular gestures.

From a Saussurean perspective, gestures in Bohua function as signifiers within a structured system of differences. A particular movement may signify anger, devotion, or celebration depending on its context within the performance. This relational nature of meaning underscores the importance of cultural knowledge in interpreting the dance.

Peirce's classification of signs further illuminates the semiotic complexity of Bohua movements. Certain gestures may function as icons by mimicking real-world actions, such as

fighting or mourning. Others operate as indexical signs, expressing emotional states through bodily expression. Symbolic gestures, on the other hand, rely on cultural conventions and may represent abstract concepts such as purity, renewal, or divine power.

The repetitive nature of these movements aligns with Schechner's concept of restored behavior, as performers reenact traditional gestures that have been transmitted across generations (Schechner 38). This repetition not only preserves cultural memory but also reinforces the symbolic meanings associated with the dance.

Costume, Mask, and Visual Signification

Costume and visual elements play a crucial role in the semiotic structure of Bohua dance. The attire worn by performers serves as a visual signifier that communicates identity, status, and symbolic meaning. Traditional costumes often incorporate elements that reflect the cultural heritage of the Sonowal Kachari community, including specific colors, patterns, and ornaments.

From a Barthesian perspective, these visual elements operate at both denotative and connotative levels. At the denotative level, costumes identify the characters or roles within the performance. At the connotative level, they convey cultural meanings related to purity, divinity, and social values (Barthes, *Mythologies* 143).

In some instances, masks and symbolic props may be used to represent mythological figures or supernatural forces. These elements function as iconic signs, resembling the entities they represent, while also serving as symbolic markers of cultural belief systems. The visual spectacle created by costume and adornment enhances the mythic dimension of the performance, transforming it into a powerful medium of communication.

Music, Rhythm, and Temporal Signification

Music and rhythm constitute another important semiotic dimension of Bohua dance. The use of traditional instruments and rhythmic patterns structures the temporal flow of the performance, guiding the movements of the dancers and shaping the emotional atmosphere.

From a semiotic perspective, music functions as an auditory sign system that complements the visual elements of the dance. Different rhythms and melodies may signify specific emotions or narrative developments, creating a dynamic interplay between sound and movement.

The synchronization of music and dance also reinforces the communal aspect of the performance. The rhythmic patterns serve as a unifying force, bringing together performers and audience members in a shared experience. This collective participation aligns with Turner's concept of *communitas*, emphasizing the social and transformative power of performance (Turner 47).

Ritual, Myth, and Barthesian Signification

The ritual dimension of Bohua dance is central to its semiotic significance. As a ritual performance, Bohua operates within a framework of sacred meaning, where actions are

imbued with symbolic and spiritual significance. Barthes' concept of myth provides a critical lens for understanding this dimension. The narrative of Shiva and Daksha, as enacted in the dance, functions as a myth that naturalizes cultural values. Through repeated performance, these values become embedded in the collective consciousness of the community, appearing as timeless and universal truths (Barthes, *Mythologies* 142).

The ritual elements of Bohua, including invocations and symbolic actions, further reinforce this process. By participating in the performance, both performers and audience members engage with the myth at a deeper level, transforming it into a lived experience. This process underscores the role of performance as a medium of cultural transmission and ideological reinforcement.

Audience, Interpretation, and Communal Identity

The role of the audience in Bohua dance is integral to its semiotic structure. Meaning is not fixed within the performance but emerges through the interaction between performers and spectators. Barthes' notion of the plurality of meaning highlights the active role of the audience in constructing interpretation (Barthes, *Image-Music-Text* 148).

Within the Sonowal Kachari community, the audience shares a common cultural framework that enables them to interpret the signs of the performance. This shared knowledge facilitates the communication of meaning and reinforces the cultural significance of the dance.

The communal nature of Bohua performance also contributes to the formation of collective identity. By participating in the ritual, community members reaffirm their shared beliefs and values, strengthening social cohesion. The dance thus functions not only as a form of artistic expression but also as a means of cultural preservation and identity formation.

Conclusion

The Bohua dance of the Sonowal Kachari tribe exemplifies how indigenous performance traditions function as complex systems of signification, embodying cultural, religious, and ideological meanings. Rather than a mere folkloric practice, Bohua operates as a dynamic semiotic structure in which gesture, costume, music, and ritual action interact to produce layered meanings. These elements collectively transform the performance into a repository of cultural memory and shared knowledge.

Drawing on the theories of Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce, the study shows that meaning in Bohua emerges through relational structures and interpretative processes (Saussure 120; Peirce 247). The application of Roland Barthes' concept of myth further reveals how the narrative of Shiva, Sati, and Daksha becomes naturalized as cultural truth through repeated performance (Barthes 142).

From a performance perspective, the ideas of Richard Schechner and Victor Turner highlight the roles of repetition and liminality in sustaining cultural continuity and fostering communal identity (Schechner 35; Turner 44). Ultimately, this study highlights the significance of approaching indigenous performance traditions through interdisciplinary frameworks that integrate semiotics, anthropology, and performance studies. Such an approach allows for a

more nuanced understanding of these practices as dynamic and meaningful cultural phenomena rather than static relics of the past. Bohua dance, in this context, emerges not only as an artistic expression but as a powerful mode of communication that transcends linguistic boundaries and articulates complex cultural meanings through embodied action.

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