

The Aronai Scarf: Its Significance and Symbolic Interpretation

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ABSTRACT:

The 'Aronai' is highly revered within the Bodo community. Traditionally, it is used to welcome warriors and guests, honour successful individuals, and during ceremonial dances such as 'Bwisagu'. The colors woven into it hold special social significance. Bodo women use natural ingredients to weave textiles and draw designs inspired by the nature surrounding them. Aronai is the most valuable and culturally significant textile item, essential to the Bodo tribal identity in Assam, India. It is a symbol of cultural identity, respect and honour. Traditionally, the scarf design created by Bodo women uses fabric made from Eri silkworms (*Samia ricini*) and Muga silkworm cocoons. Nowadays, it is available in various materials, including cotton and polyester. The activities of Bodo women in textiles and their motifs are fundamental to the cultural identity and are a crucial aspect of the community's elite culture. The study highlights how designers and artisans (Bodo women) interpret, express, and transform cultural values through their creative works.

Keywords: Aronai, semiotic, symbolic, textile, Bodo

1. Introduction

The Bodo are the largest indigenous tribe in Assam, North East India, belonging to the Tibeto-Burman ethno-linguistic group. In addition to Assam, the Bodos are found in Nagaland, Meghalaya, West Bengal and foreign countries like Nepal. The Bodo community has its own unique culture, language, and identity. Though they may be few in number, as census records show, they are abundant in all essential aspects of community life. The Bodo people are primarily dependent on nature; thus, their culture and traditional work are closely related to it. Similarly, the textile traditions of the Bodos reflect a strong connection to nature through their fabric composition, weaving techniques, and intricate designs. Additionally, they are also specialists in dyeing textiles, which represents a

prestigious aspect of culture. Bodo traditional textiles can be categorised into several key garments, each characterised by unique and iconic design elements. These include *Dokbona*, *Jwmgra*, *Aronai*, *Gamsa*, *Sima Si*, and others. The textiles often feature various motifs inspired by the surrounding nature, such as *Hajw Agor* (Hills design Motif), *Dhingkhia Agor* (vegetable fern design motif), *Daosa mwkherb Agor*, *Faron Megon Agor* (Pigeon eye design motif), *Leoa Agor* (Creeper design motif), *Gandwula Agor* (dragonfly design motif), *Bonduram Agor* (Friendship motif), *Daorai Agor* (Peacock design motif) and *Okhafwr Agor* (Moon design motif), etc. Likewise, the textiles of the Bodos showcase a rich array of designs and motifs, each serving as a powerful symbol or sign that reflects their cultural heritage.

The theoretical study of signs and their symbolic interpretations is known as semiotics. John Deely (1990) stated that “the whole of human experience...is an interpretive structure mediated and sustained by signs”. “Semiotics is the theoretical accounting for signs and what they do. It is the study of signs and sign-using behaviour, including semiosis or the action of signs. The action, which may be physical or psychological, takes place between two subjects that exist physically plus a third element that need not be an actual existing thing.”¹ The investigation of signs in textiles involves a “semiotic consciousness,” or the awareness of symbolic content in clothing, fabrics, and textile motifs. A textile sign or symbol can be depicted realistically or in an abstract style. Individuals who use the symbol in a cultural context understand its meaning or implications, regardless of how it is depicted. This paper follows the semiotic theory developed by Ferdinand de Saussure. According to him, “A sign must have both a signifier and a signified; you cannot have a meaningless signifier/form or a meaningless signified/concept. The two always go together; they are like the two sides of a coin.”² The paper examines the cultural symbolism and meaning-making processes in the textile weaves and design practices of the Bodo community’s *Aronai* through semiotics perspectives.

1.1. Problems of study and Objectives

No one has been done on research on this topic. There is a dearth of literature. This study is completely based on empirical data. The main objectives of the study are:

- i. To highlight how designers and artisans (Bodo women) interpret, express, and transform

cultural values through their creative textile works

- ii. To study the traditional *Aronai* scarf and its symbolic meanings

- iii. To explore motif Designs of the *Aronai* scarf

1.2. Literature Review:

We have studied several books in the preparation of this research paper. Some of them are listed below:

John Deely’s *Basics of Semiotics* which was published by Indiana University Press, Bloomington, in 1990. Here, the author described about the theory and basic elements of semiotics along with the growth and development of semiotics. *A History of Assam* by Sir Edward Gait that was published in 2003 by Bina Library, Guwahati. This book deals with the history of the people of Assam about their kingdom, culture and civilization. Another book titled “*Boro Kacharini Somaj arw Harimu*” by Bhaben Narzi, published by Chirang Publication Board, Kajalgaon, Assam, 2006. The author mentioned about the Bodos culture, religion and social system. Again, he has tried to express broadly regarding the weaving tradition of the Bodo society. In addition to the books, different research papers published by the different journals were taken as a source of secondary materials.

1.3 Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to examine the symbolism of the ‘Aronai Scarf.’ By combining both quantitative and qualitative methods, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of its socio-cultural significance within the community along with the use of various colors. Furthermore, to gain a holistic understanding of the subjective experiences and symbolic meanings associated with the creation of contemporary textile crafts and attire by Bodo women, this article utilizes a qualitative method-specifically, a phenomenological approach.

¹ Behera, Priyaranjan. “A Framework of Semiotics Theory to Understand the Signs and Their Meaning in Society.” *International Journal of Arts, Architecture & Design*. Vol. 2, No. 1, January 2024 (ISSN 2584 0282)

² Hjelm, Sara Ilstedt. “Semiotics in product design” *Department of Numerical Analysis and Computer Science*, September 2002, p.3

Research Design

To evaluate the use of various signs and symbols, this study adopts a descriptive and exploratory design. The research is divided into two phases: i. quantitative data collection, and ii. qualitative interviews and case study analysis.

The researchers employed two methods for data collection: interviews and the use of secondary sources. The researchers visited various locations and conducted interviews to gather reliable data from experts, designers, and observers in the traditional textile weaving experts. Additionally, various books and research articles were collected and thoroughly analyzed; the findings from these were used to structure the article and derive meaningful results. Thus, data was gathered from both primary and secondary sources.

Results and Findings

- i. This study finds the usage of *aronai* in different times
- ii. It finds the different types of *aronai* and their usages
- iii. It finds different types of color symbolism in Bodo culture. Women use various colours in '*Aronai*' attire such as yellow (Gwgw/Gwmo), green (Gwthang), white (gufur), red (gwja). These colours use in different meaning.
- iv. A comparison between handloom and power loom usage reveals that the traditional knowledge passed down from mothers to daughters in rural areas is facing a crisis.
- v. The rapid expansion of the market led to the widespread proliferation of cheap, machine-made counterfeit goods, which harmed the production of authentic handloom products and jeopardized the livelihoods of rural artisans.
- vi. It gains legal protection through Geographical Indication (GI) recognition; this tag helps safeguard authentic handloom weaving techniques and supports the economic stability of local artisans.

Limitation of Study

Aronai scarf holds deep cultural, spiritual, and historical significance, yet they face numerous

functional, social, and protective challenges in the modern world.

The Bodo women have to depend on others products and raw materials that prevent them from being utilized or created as desired; the process demands significant time and labour, involving months of hand-weaving, dyeing, and hand-stitching. Furthermore, the younger generation often lacks the specialized training required for this craft.

Attracted by the beauty and utility of the *Aronai*, entrepreneurs frequently copy its designs to mass-produce cheaper versions without any compensating the original artisans. Modern influences are increasingly prevalent today; globalized fashion trends are steering young people away from traditional attire.

1.4 Discussion

Handloom and textile weaving are integral cultural elements of Bodo society. *Aronai* consists of different colours that symbolize different meanings. The *aronai* experts mentioned about the significance of these colours:

- Yellow symbolizes the earth, the harvest, and sanctity. Representing prosperity and a deep bond with nature, it stands as a primary color in traditional Bodo attire.
- Green (Gwthang): This symbolizes life, growth, and the region's lush natural environment. It reflects the community's agricultural roots and respect for nature.
- White (Gufur): This symbolizes purity, peace, and truth. It is frequently used in religious rituals or significant traditional events.
- Red (Gwja): This symbolizes strength, passion, and valour. In modern designs, it adds a vibrant aesthetic appeal to the attire.

Needless to say that the Bodo women weave different types of *Aronai* attire with the above mentioned colours. The garments and their designs reflect diverse societal concepts and signify an individual's community identity. The motifs and symbols used in these designs function as a form of symbolic language. A study of Bodo attire and design patterns reveals

the cultural and symbolic significance embedded in their traditional weaving practices. Traditionally in India, women have woven cloth to meet their needs; similarly, within the Bodo community, it is the women who weave the fabric. Bodo women are adept at designing and dyeing textiles. Drawing inspiration from their natural surroundings-such as flora, fauna, and landscapes-they create intricate designs on the fabric.

These women are skilled designers, artisans, dyers, and weavers; indeed, they can be regarded as textile engineers or technologists. *Aronai* is one of the traditional hand-woven textiles of the Bodos that '*Aronai*' holds immense significance in Bodo society, embodying values such as honor, respect, and cultural identity.

Its intricate patterns and rich history not only enhance the wearer's appearance but also foster a deep sense of pride and belonging within the community. Thus, these textile designs convey a multitude of ideas and meanings, reflecting the presence of nature within the community's culture.

The *Aronai* is a traditional garment of the Bodo community, worn as a scarf or a waistband. It symbolizes honor, respect, and cultural identity. Historically, the *Aronai* was worn as an emblem of protection, respect, and affection. In times of war, Bodo women would weave an *Aronai* in a single night to gift to warriors before they departed for battle.

Today, it is used to welcome and honor guests, elders, and dignitaries at weddings, festivals, and public gatherings by draping it around their necks. During traditional dances, men and women drape it over one shoulder or use it as a waistband. Men also wear it as a '*Phaori*' (a hand-woven cap) during traditional dance performances.

Additionally, it is worn as a headpiece by the groom as part of his wedding attire. According to Geographical Indication (GI) tag records, the length of the *Aronai* ranges from 1.5 to 2.5 meters. "Its designs are inspired by the natural world, with motifs drawn from trees, flowers,

birds, and mountains, echoing the Bodo community's deep connection with nature."³

The *Aronai* scarf beautifully features two distinctive designs or motifs: "*Hajw Agor*" and "*Bonduram Agor*." "*Hajw Agor*" symbolizes the beauty of the hilly terrain, while "*Bonduram Agor*" beautifully represents the spirit of friendship among people.

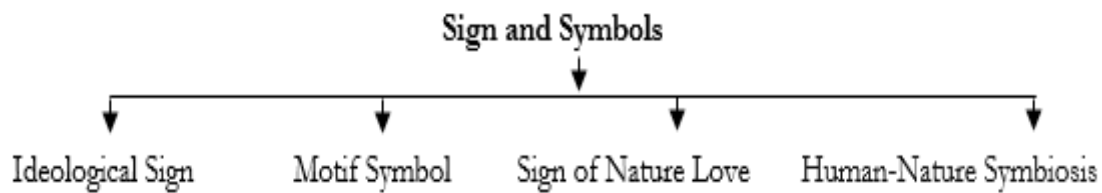
These *Aronai* motifs demonstrate how craftsmanship serves as a powerful medium for cultural dialogue, effectively conveying significant moral messages to the community. Thus, the '*Aronai*'-a beautifully woven scarf or muffler of the Bodo community-is more than just a piece of fabric; it is a symbol of the rich cultural heritage and identity of the Bodo tribe residing in different parts of India and abroad as well.

In October 2024, the '*Aronai*' cloth of the Bodo community was officially granted the 'Geographical Indication' (GI) tag. In today's world, this scarf has become a vital identifier for the Bodo community, showcasing their unique identity on a global stage.

Its vibrant colors and intricate designs make it a significant emblem of pride and tradition for the community.

The signs and symbols that are found in the *Aronai* are brought out below:

³ <https://www.indiatodayne.in/assam/story/assams-8-unique-products-secure-gi-tag-celebrate-regions-rich-cultural-heritage-1100984-2024-10-02>



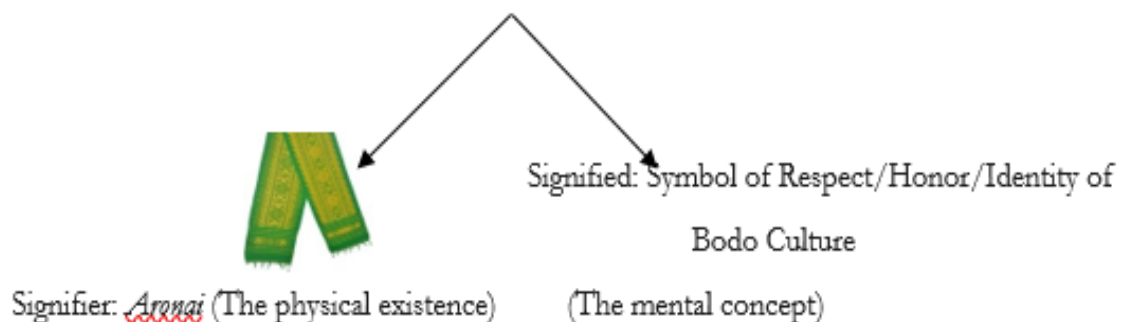
As above, the reflections of the sign's reflection and the symbolism of the *Aronai* scarf have been analyzed through a semiotic lens, highlighting their deeper meanings and connections.

Ideological Sign:

An ideological sign is a visual symbol, mark, or gesture that conveys ethical, philosophical, or religious sentiments rather than promoting commercial products. These signs represent specific values and beliefs within a religious context and are often used to express commitment to various religious and social movements.

Instead of religious symbols, ideological symbols appear in various fields; for instance, the '*Aronai*' scarf of the Bodo people reflects an ideological sign that embodies a profound concept as a signifier. As a key figure in semiotics, Saussure's views suggest that *Aronai* is a signifier, signifying the respect, honour, and identity of Bodo culture. As a key figure in semiotics, Saussure's views suggest that *Aronai* is a signifier, signifying the respect, honour, and identity of Bodo culture. This signifier and signified can also be presented in a chart, as shown below:

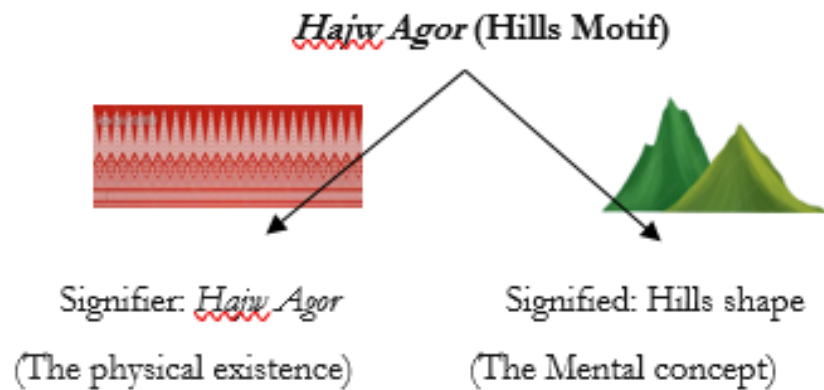
***Aronai* (Signifier)**



Here, as shown above, the signifier is the physical existence of the signified, and the mental concept of the signified is the signified.

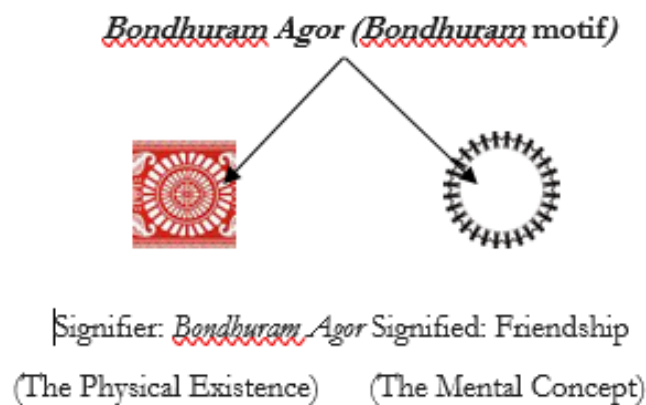
Motif Symbols: A textile motif is a recurring visual element, such as a symbol, shape, or figure, used to create patterns that often carry deep cultural or symbolic meanings. These motifs embody nature, beliefs, and artistic traditions, conveying values such as prosperity and protection through embroidery in textiles. Motifs serve not only as decoration but also tell stories that reflect social values, regional identity, and historical influences. Various motifs are

found in the Bodos' *Aronai* scarf that carry significant meanings within their society. Since ancient times, *Hajw Agor* and *Bonduram Agor* have been used in the *Aronai* textile of the Bodo community. The term *Hajw* means hill, and *Agor* means motif. From Saussure's semiotic perspective, *Hajw Agor* is a signifier that signifies the natural hill shape. This motif's perspective is made by noticing the hill in the Brahmaputra Valley. The *Hajw Agor* (Hills motif) is a symbolic design created by Bodo women in the *Aronai* scarf. Based on Saussure's theory, the symbolic *Hajw Agor* (Hills motif) can also be represented in a chart with a picture:



Similarly, the *Bonduram Agor* (*Bondburam* motif) is an important design featured in the Bodos' *Aronai* scarf. The term '*Bondbu*' means 'friend'. "*Bondburam Agor*" represents the essence of friendship woven into the *Aronai* scarf. In ancient times, it symbolized the friendship

among warriors, and nowadays, it symbolizes friendship among all people. Thus, the *Bondburam* motif is identified as a signifier symbolic and signifies the friendship among people. As a model of semiotics, it can be shown with a chart:



A Sign of Natural Love:

Love for nature is defined by unconditional acceptance and a sense of genuine ease. The symbols on the Bodo people's '*Aronai*' scarf beautifully illustrate their deep connection with nature, expressing an affinity that truly touches the heart. The hill motif on the *Aronai* scarf reflects a love for nature and the surrounding environment; here, the hill motif serves as a signifier or physical form, while the Bodo women's love for the hills represents signified or an emotional bond. In this way, the natural love is reflected in the *Aronai* scarf as motifs or textile designs of the Bodos.

Human-Nature Symbiosis:

The concept of symbiosis between humans and nature in textiles that makes clothing a vibrant,

working together ecosystem, benefiting both people and the environment. This is a departure from thinking of fashion as just a disposable thing. The material used in botanical dyeing, fabric production, and textile tools clearly shows the deep connection between humans and nature. This synergy explores our shared responsibility to build a sustainable future together. The Bodo people use a variety of natural materials, including flowers, roots, barks, leaves, and fruits to create brilliant colors for their clothing. They dye clothes in different ways, such as boiling, soaking, fermentation, and drying process with mordants.

The Bodo people rear *Eri* silkworms to produce silk thread, making this practice a vital component of ecological balance. Their deep bond with the *Eri* silkworm reflects a respect for

the natural world and plays a crucial role in the creation and design of Bodo textiles. This connection highlights their cultural craftsmanship and enhances the distinctiveness of their textile art. The relationship between the Bodo people and the Eri silkworm demonstrates their understanding of and respect for nature, an influence that is also reflected in their clothing designs.

Bodo textile is a culturally significant handloom art of Assam, closely woven from natural fibers such as *eri* and *muga*. These textiles incorporate motifs inspired by various forms found in the nearby natural surroundings. Such motifs serve as powerful symbols of nature and reflect the deep connection between Bodo culture and the natural world.

1.5 Conclusion

The textiles of the Bodo community in Assam act like a “living archive”, showcasing ancestral love for the looks and promoting social cohesion. Systems of weaving are an essential part of Bodo identity, lovingly passed down from generations of Bodo women. By embracing these traditions, they not only preserve their rich cultural heritage, but also strengthen their relationship with nature, showing an ever-present relationship that deserves recognition and respect. The designs and motifs of the woven fabrics of the Bodo community are inspired by nature. Plants, animals, birds, insects, crafts and scenery play an important role in the motifs of Bodo clothing. These motifs are shown in the clothes as symbols that convey deep meaning, as well as the natural love and harmony between humanity and nature in society. Thus, as mentioned above, the *Aronai* textile and its motifs convey deeper meanings and serve as a mode of interaction in society.

Recommendation for future study:

i. The rising cost of yarn is a significant challenge demanding our immediate attention. Fluctuating and high prices for raw silk and

cotton yarn are significantly impacting profit margins.

ii. Historically, the Bodo community showcased exceptional craftsmanship by producing diverse threads and colours from local plants. It is imperative for community members to invest in research and develop their own threads, moving away from reliance on external sources.

iii. Furthermore, policymakers and stakeholders in this sector must prioritize fostering innovation on both domestic and global fronts. Expanding access to modern financial services and building robust market linkages are crucial steps forward. Embracing e-commerce and direct-to-consumer sales is essential for enabling local weaver clusters to bypass middlemen and sell their products directly to a global audience.

iv. The industry must confidently adapt and innovate to captivate the general public. Transitioning from traditional designs to modern fusion wear, stoles, and home decor will significantly broaden our market appeal.

v. In addition, weaving is poised to play a pivotal role in shaping Assam's cultural and economic landscape, particularly within the Bodo community. The Bodoland Territorial Council must take bold initiatives to champion and promote the weaving industry. Achieving these goals requires strong collaboration among key stakeholders, including government agencies, NGOs, and private investors. By creating a supportive ecosystem that emphasizes sustainable practices and fosters skill development, we can elevate the sector's competitiveness and empower local communities to thrive.

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