



From Oral Tradition to Academia: The Evolution of Kokborok Literature

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ABSTRACT

The study of Kokborok folklore in Tripura's tribal communities reveals an intimate relationship between the tribal's and the animate world. This interest can be traced back to nineteenth-century Europe, particularly Germany, where scholars and intellectuals began taking a serious interest in the collection and study of folklore materials in various forms, such as folk tales, folk songs, ballads and languages. Each nation—and indeed each language—has its unique folktales, but the emotional resonance and life styles depicted often share similarities. In India, as in Tripura—the second smallest state in the North-East—Kokborok is a major language of the indigenous Borok people, often referred to as the "king's language" since time immemorial. The oral literature in Kokborok encompasses a diverse range of forms, including folktales, cultural narratives, folk songs, lullabies, proverbs, elegies, riddles, lamentations, and more, all of which have been preserved and propagated under the rule of kings through the ages. Among the folk songs, the most popular are the *Goriya* (Deity) song, *MosokSolmani* (Hunting) song, *Mamita* (celebration of Jhum cultivation) song, *Tangbiti* (arts of Jhum) song, *UayingKhilimung* (lullaby), *Koktang* (rhymes), *Kokbwkrai* (proverbs), *Kapsimang* (lamentation), *Jadukolija* (traditional song), and *Kokphumokmung* (riddles). These elements collectively enrich and

ornament Kokborok literature, reflecting the language's cultural depth and historical significance.

1. Introduction:

Tripura, once an independent kingdom, became part of India on October 15, 1949, following the signing of the Tripura Merger Agreement on September 9, 1949. Today, it stands as the third smallest state in the country, yet it is home to a rich diversity of cultures, languages, and traditional practices that reflect the larger tapestry of India. Among these is Kokborok, the aboriginal language of Tripura, which has been spoken since time immemorial. This rich and ornamented language carries the legacy of a royal heritage, passed down through generations, along with its vibrant folklore, which preserves the traditions and legendary culture of the Borok people.

Kokborok is a major language spoken by the indigenous people of Tripura, encompassing nine community groups: Debbarma, Puran (Old) Tripuri, Reang, Jamatia, Noatia, Murasing, Uchoi, Rupini, and Kalai. These groups all trace their linguistic roots to the Sino-Tibetan language family, specifically the Bodo-Naga branch. Over centuries, Kokborok has evolved to become a vital part of the identity and cultural expression of these communities.

The late 19th and early 20th centuries witnessed the emergence of Kokborok writers such as Md. Daulot Ahmed and Radha Mohan Thakur, who laid the foundation for the tradition of written literature. This literary movement continued into the first half of the 20th century, with many writers contributing to the language's growth. Notable figures of this period include Bangsi Thakur, Samerendra Debbarma, Sadhu KhusikrishnaSudhwana Debbarma, Ram Chandra Debbarma, Braja Kumar Debbarma, Rubirung Devi, Nabalaxmi Debbarma, Dasarath Debbarma, Ajit Bandhu Debbarma, Mahendra Debbarma, and Kumud Kundu Chaudhuri.

In the latter half of the 20th century, a new generation of writers emerged, including Ramkumar Debbarma, Kumud Ranjan Debbarma, Ramesh Debbarma, Nikhil Debbarma, Shyamlal Debbarma, Naresh Chandra Debbarma, Rabindra Debbarma, Nanda Kumar Debbarma, Dr. Budhurai Debbarma, Dr. Nitai Acharjee, Chandra Kanta Murasing, and Sunil Debbarma, among others. Their contributions have further enriched Kokborok literature, ensuring its growth and preservation for future generations.

Since 2011, Kokborok has been formally taught in colleges and universities, marking a significant milestone in its preservation. This academic recognition has also facilitated the documentation of previously unexplored folk literature, uncovering the hidden richness of indigenous Kokborok traditions. These efforts, led by prominent writers and institutions, have laid a strong foundation for a deeper understanding of the cultural and literary wealth of Tripura's indigenous people.

Examples of this folk literature include tales such as *Khumpui*, *SinjoOgla*, and *Yamroksa*. The inclusion of Kokborok in academic institutions has provided students with the opportunity to research and explore the Borok people's philosophy, culture, folklore, ethics, economics, and societal structures. Furthermore, this academic focus enables the study of the "Borok People's History," offering valuable insights into the legacy of the Tripura kingdom and its contributions to the cultural fabric of the region.

2. What is folklore?

Folklore is a compilation of the beliefs, customs, mores, and practices of distinct cultural groups. It reaches back in time to oral cultures, encompassing tales, creation myths, proverbs, riddles children's games and songs, and belief systems including rites and rituals surrounding coupling, childbirth, initiation into adulthood, and ideas about the afterlife. It also includes styles of building, foods, recipes, and the use of medicinal plants. Folklore is not generally passed along in formal educational settings but through group ceremonies, individual tutoring, and children's play. It represents a shared set of beliefs and may therefore be part of any shared culture, not just one that has a common history, ethnicity, religion, or language. In the modern world, even computer programmers, stage actors, and surfers have their own lore. Often, folklore is revived from an earlier generation by a later one, as evidenced by the resurgence of quilting popularity and local shops like "Granny Taught Us How."

For example, traditional Kokborok children's games such as *Ekheng-Ekheng*, *SwkuiKokmani*, *Kadong-Kadeng*, *ToklaTalaima*, *Chur Chur*, and others were once widely played. These games not only entertained but also imparted social and cultural values. However, in modern times, children are largely unfamiliar with these traditional games, and many do not even recognize their names, highlighting the gradual loss of cultural heritage.

Folklore encompasses the stories and beliefs of a particular culture or group, ranging from tales of spirits and monsters to enchanted worlds. These stories have been shared for thousands of years—around campfires, during communal gatherings, and sung beside beds—in every corner of the world. As an

expression of collective imagination, folklore reflects the beliefs and values of cultures throughout history, exploring profound themes such as the battle between good and evil, love and loss, and life after death. Folktales are a universal phenomenon, present in every culture, from the greatest civilizations to the smallest tribal communities. Strikingly, these stories often share common themes, illustrating how human experiences transcend cultural and geographical boundaries. Despite the rapid changes in the modern world, these tales remain as relevant today as they were thousands of years ago, reflecting the enduring nature of human beliefs and emotions.

For example, in Kokborok folklore, stories of spirits and monsters such as *Chakbayama*, *Swkal*, *Bedua*, *ThumnairogBonirog*, *Haichuma*, and others depict supernatural beings that harm people, reflecting the beliefs of those times. These stories often served as cautionary tales, warning against danger and instilling moral lessons.

Kokborok also includes traditional folk songs for children, many of which blend entertainment with moral instruction. Examples include *Sajwrajojora lama ta tongdilathatwinairogphaio* ("Don't stand in the road during forenoon; the evil spirit will come and attack you"), *Yakoraikwchakhadulwinanganwrangchakniyaklap kadi* ("Put on your shoes, or they will collect dirt and harm your feet"), *Rangchakniuyingrwpheinibuduk*, *liklikuayingdukromwithudimwnai* ("Sleep well, oh sweetheart, while holding the cradle rope; the cradle is made of gold, and the rope is made of silver"), and *Sajwrajoratoraktwimajora*, *mwnaithunanijora* ("It is time to sleep, oh sweetheart; the time for the cock to lay an egg in the forenoon"). These songs and stories collectively contribute to the rich tapestry of Kokborok folklore, preserving cultural wisdom and connecting generations through shared traditions.

3. A Brief History of Collecting and Categorizing Folklore in Europe and in Kokborok

Folklore becomes distinguished as such when its practical purposes fade, yet its transmission continues due to its cultural significance. For instance, quilting, which originally served as a vital skill in cold climates, is now cherished for its aesthetic value and as a cultural relic. Folklorists seek to understand why certain beliefs or practices persist within cultures, exploring their roles and continued relevance.

In Europe, the collection of verbal folklore, such as fairy tales, initially served the purposes of nation-building. These collections distinguished the "refined" high cultures of the aristocracy from the "low" cultures of the peasantry. Among the most famous examples are the Brothers Grimm's collections from

1812, which captured tales from rural and later urban settings, reflecting the class distinctions that shaped early folklore studies. Stories like Cinderella and Hansel and Gretel exemplify this tradition.

The scope of folklore has since expanded to encompass not only stories and songs but also games, crafts, and customary practices. These elements are often categorized according to their nature of performance, such as verbal folklore, material artifacts, customs and beliefs, and child lore, illustrating the diverse manifestations of folklore.

In the Borok people's customary practices, bamboo holds immense cultural and practical significance. Bamboo is intricately interwoven with all aspects of life, from birth to death. For example, bamboo is used to cut a baby's umbilical cord after birth and to craft Khamjang (a bamboo coffin-like structure) for carrying the deceased to the funeral site. Bamboo is not only an essential craft material but also a symbol of the Borok people's resourcefulness and cultural identity. It serves as a staple vegetable in the form of bamboo shoots, as well as a material for constructing houses, making firewood, crafting utensils, baskets, flower pots, ornaments, and more.

Modern ethnology and cultural anthropology now recognize that every social group—whether families, friends, or colleagues—harbors its distinct folklore. This acknowledgment enriches our understanding of communal bonds, cultural continuity, and the ever-evolving nature of folklore..

4. Types of Folklore in Kokborok

Kokborok folklore encompasses a rich tapestry of cultural expressions, primarily manifesting in myths, legends, and fables that are intrinsic to the indigenous communities of Tripura.

4.1 Myths in Kokborok Culture

Myths in Kokborok culture delve into the origins of the universe, natural phenomena, and the foundational aspects of human existence. These narratives often feature spirits and deities that are integral to the community's cosmology, reflecting the Borok people's deep connection with nature and the divine.

For example, myths such as Bura BwrwichukTha Kaimani, MayungKuphur, and Juangkha explore themes of creation, the balance of natural elements, and the moral and spiritual lessons essential to sustaining harmony within the tribe. These stories serve as both a spiritual guide and a means of preserving the collective wisdom of the community, passed down through generations.

4.2 Legends in Kokborok Culture

Legends in Kokborok recount the exploits of historical and mythical heroes who embody the virtues of courage and integrity. These narratives often celebrate individuals who have played pivotal roles in shaping the tribe's history and culture, serving as moral and inspirational exemplars for the community.

For example, legends such as MayungKuphur and JamingSlong highlight acts of bravery, leadership, and sacrifice that resonate deeply with the Borok people. These tales not only preserve the memory of significant historical and cultural figures but also reinforce the values and identity of the community, inspiring future generations to uphold their heritage.

4.3 Fables in Kokborok Folklore

Fables within Kokborok folklore are particularly aimed at the younger generation, often featuring animals that speak and behave like humans. These moralistic stories are crafted to impart ethical lessons and practical wisdom through engaging and straightforward narratives. By using relatable characters and simple plots, these fables teach values such as honesty, kindness, and perseverance, making them an integral part of cultural education.

For example, fables like TokmaAuangSukmani and Sinja Oglā use animal protagonists to convey timeless lessons that resonate with young minds. Each type of folklore in Kokborok not only entertains but also educates, serving as a vehicle for preserving the rich cultural heritage of the indigenous people. Through these stories, the wisdom of the past continues to guide and influence future generations, ensuring the continuity of cultural identity and values.

5. In What Contexts Do We Study Kokborok Folklore?

Kokborok folklore is studied not only as a rich cultural artifact but also as an essential means of understanding the social and historical fabric of Tripura's indigenous communities. In academic settings, such as universities and colleges, Kokborok folklore is integrated into various disciplines, reflecting its profound cultural significance and scholarly value.

5.1 Cultural Studies and Literature in Kokborok

Courses on Kokborok folklore delve into the language's narratives, songs, and rituals, emphasizing their critical role in shaping the cultural identity of Tripura's tribal communities. These studies provide

students with valuable insights into the traditional wisdom, values, and worldviews that have been transmitted through generations via oral traditions.

For example, the *Jadu Kolija* song is a significant component of Kokborok folklore, traditionally sung during *Jhum* cultivation and family rituals and celebrations. Another notable example is the *Tangbiti* song, which guides the selection of a jungle for *Jhum* cultivation. The following lines from the song illustrate this practice:

"O bosongmayojalrogba

Kami chokdiritentaitangphaikha

Ha- kwrainainabagwi.

Phaiditakhurogphaidi

Phaidibayarogphaidi.

Dokhinchaliyaberainaiyanw,

Ha kwra made mano.

Bui swlaiswkangbolongnaikhese

Bolong ha- kwra mano."

(Kokborok LukuKokrwbai, Page No. 17)

This excerpt reflects the intrinsic connection between Kokborok folklore and the natural environment, illustrating how traditional songs serve both practical and spiritual purposes within the community.

5.2 History

Historical studies utilize folklore to trace the lineage and migration patterns of tribes, as well as their interactions with other cultures and communities. Folklore acts as both a historical document and a medium through which the collective memory of the people is preserved, capturing the emotions, struggles, and traditions of the Borok people.

For example, the lamentation song *ResiarKhagra* illustrates the pain of a newly married woman whose husband went to war with a neighboring country, East Pakistan, and did not return. The song captures her sorrow and yearning:

*"Hadukdukkolokmaiswipinjagwi
Pagorinurugliya, jadupagorinurugliya.
Hadukdukkolokgunthupinjagwi
Yakurainurugliya, jadyakurainurugliya.
Twigerenggerenggatichajagwi
Rinhinwikhwnaliya, jadurihinwikhwnaliya.
Gati holongsabangmanibagwi
Ruktharwiswlapliya, jaduruktharwiswlapliya.
Maisingsiaribangmanibagwi
Naharwinurugliya, jadunaharwinurugliya."
(Kokborok Bhasha–SahityerKramabikash, Page No. 23)*

This song demonstrates how folklore preserves historical events and emotional experiences, serving as a bridge to the past.

5.3 Education

Kokborok folklore is also an essential educational tool, used in schools to foster a sense of identity and pride among young indigenous students. It connects them with their heritage, enhancing their understanding and appreciation of their culture. Including Kokborok folklore in academic curricula helps to ensure that these traditions are preserved and passed on to future generations.

Currently, colleges and universities incorporate Kokborok riddles, lullabies, lamentations, and proverbs into their academic programs, enriching the educational experience for students and promoting cultural preservation.

For example, riddles in Kokborok serve as both a form of entertainment and a tool for critical thinking.

1. *"Tini thangkhelekhwnaphaiyanw,
Nukhungkotornihamjwk."*

(Translation: "The wife of the prince, if she goes today, she will return tomorrow.")

Answer: The Sun.

2. "*Mwswirangchakharwrwk,
Tokhacosombarwrwk.*"

(Translation: "The blacksmith melts the iron, bending it to his will.")

Answer: Lightning.

Studying Kokborok folklore in these contexts not only enriches academic disciplines but also strengthens efforts toward cultural preservation, ensuring that the lore of the indigenous people continues to contribute to global cultural knowledge.

6. Importance of Kokborok Folklore

Kokborok folklore is invaluable in preserving the cultural heritage and transmitting the collective memory of Tripura's indigenous communities. It goes beyond mere entertainment, serving as a vital link to the past by offering profound insights into the community's history, values, and societal norms.

6.1 Cultural Identity of the Borok People

Kokborok folklore plays a fundamental role in fostering a strong sense of identity among the indigenous Borok people. Stories, songs, dress, beliefs, worship practices, and rituals encapsulate unique cultural traits that distinguish the community from others, reinforcing shared identity and continuity.

For example, the Borok people have their distinct cultural identity, including their traditional attire, *Rignai* and *Risa*. These handwoven fabrics feature intricate and colorful designs, showcasing the artistry of the community. Similarly, their cuisine reflects a connection to their heritage, with staple dishes such as *Chakhwi*, *Gudok*, *Mosdeng*, steamed sticky rice (*Bangwi*), and other foods traditionally prepared without oil.

6.2 Education

Beyond its inclusion in formal education, Kokborok folklore serves as a powerful tool for informal learning. It imparts moral lessons, social values, and practical wisdom through engaging narratives that resonate with listeners of all ages, particularly the youth.

For instance, Kokborok proverbs are a repository of cultural wisdom and are now incorporated into academic syllabi to preserve and pass them on to younger generations. Examples of Kokborok proverbs include:

- *'Hangar da suhinwiphur'* (Even in famine, patience prevails).
- *'Twimabonaitwirignaiswtwi'* (River flow without regret, like the beauty of a cloth).
- *'A romnathangkheharpeknangnainw'* (A lazy person cannot climb to success).
- *'Swikhitung da uasung da hinwi peng'* (The seed you sow determines the fruit you reap).

6.3 Moral Values

Many Kokborok tales are rooted in principles of justice, loyalty, bravery, and respect for nature. These stories entertain while reinforcing ethical behavior and promoting social cohesion within the community.

For example, the folktale *Chethuang* serves as a moral lesson against unethical behavior. It tells the story of a brother who sought to marry his own sister, against societal norms. When the sister learned of her family's approval of the marriage, she sought divine intervention by planting a *Chethuang* plant in their courtyard and chanting a prayer:

"Dada bai anokainanihino

Lok chethuanglok.

(Translation: "With my brother they are going to marry me, *Chethuang*, grow taller and taller so that I may escape this marriage.") The plant grew tall, helping her escape the marriage, thus symbolizing the importance of ethics and respect for societal norms.

7. Elements of Kokborok Folklore in Literature

Kokborok literature is deeply imbued with elements of folklore, which play a crucial role in enriching the literary landscape and providing deeper insights into the cultural and social fabric of Tripura's indigenous communities. These elements serve as a bridge between past traditions and contemporary cultural expressions, ensuring the preservation of the Borok people's identity and values through literature.

7.1 Narrative Structures in Kokborok Folklore

Kokborok folklore often employs distinctive narrative techniques, such as circular storytelling and the use of repetition. These structures not only reinforce the moral and thematic depth of the stories but also make them more memorable and impactful. Such techniques are echoed in contemporary Kokborok literature, illustrating the enduring influence of folklore on literary forms.

For example, in the folktale KhumpuiBarwrwk, the younger sister calls out to her brother-in-law using a repetitive chant: “Kumui-wi, kumui-wi, kumuilemai chana phaidiba.” This chant is sung repeatedly in the story, creating a rhythmic and engaging narrative. The song is central to the tale, which culminates in her father cutting the python (her brother-in-law) in the Jhum field.

7.2 Character Archetypes in Kokborok Literature

Folklore in Kokborok literature features common archetypes, such as the wise elder, the trickster, and the hero. These archetypes embody specific cultural virtues or flaws, serving as cultural touchstones that allow readers to reflect on personal and societal values.

For example, characters like ChibukHachikiri and Jamisolong embody traits of courage, resilience, and wisdom. Their stories not only entertain but also provide moral lessons that resonate with the Borok community’s cultural ethos.

7.3 Mythical and Realistic Blending in Kokborok Literature

Kokborok literature often blends mythical elements with realistic settings, reflecting the community’s belief systems and the interplay between the mystical and the mundane in daily life. This fusion enriches the narratives, creating a dynamic and immersive storytelling experience that resonates deeply with the Borok people’s worldview.

For example, stories like Kherengbar and Bwta bai Hanok Mayung Khamani weave mythical themes into realistic scenarios, demonstrating how spiritual and everyday realities coexist in the cultural imagination of the Borok people.

The integration of folklore in Kokborok literature not only enhances the narrative and aesthetic qualities of the texts but also serves as a bridge between past traditions and contemporary cultural expressions.

This ensures cultural continuity while allowing literature to remain a vibrant and relevant part of the community's cultural life.

Conclusion

Kokborok folklore, rich in myths, legends, fables, and oral traditions, is a vital cultural asset that embodies the identity, wisdom, and heritage of Tripura's indigenous communities. Through its compelling narratives and vibrant expressions, Kokborok folklore serves multiple functions—it educates, preserves history, instills moral values, and strengthens community bonds.

In literature, elements of Kokborok folklore enhance narrative depth, enrich character development, and infuse texts with culturally significant motifs and themes. This literary integration helps maintain a continuous dialogue between the past and the present, allowing folklore to remain a dynamic and influential force in contemporary cultural expression among the Borok peoples.

Moreover, the study of Kokborok folklore in academic and social contexts supports not only the preservation of this rich heritage but also promotes an understanding of the socio-cultural dynamics of the indigenous populations. It is through these studies that folklore transcends its traditional roles, contributing to educational curricula and offering insights into the community's way of life and belief systems.

In conclusion, Kokborok folklore is not merely a collection of tales and songs from Tripura's past; it is a living, evolving repository of the collective memory and identity of its people, playing a crucial role in cultural preservation and education for future. As such, efforts to study, understand, and promote Kokborok folklore are essential for sustaining the cultural vitality and heritage of the indigenous communities.

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