



Myths, Rituals, and Oral Traditions in Kokborok Folklore

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ABSTRACT

Kokborok, the language of the Borok people of Tripura, is deeply interwoven with an ancient and vibrant oral tradition that sustains the community's spiritual beliefs, myths, and ritualistic practices. For generations, storytelling has been the primary medium through which history, cosmology, and societal values have been transmitted. This volume explores the centrality of oral traditions in the preservation of indigenous identity, focusing on myths, legends, and ritual narratives such as those performed during the Bisor, Garia Puja, Ker, and Mamita festivals. In addition, the oral tradition includes Jadukolija, lullabies, elegies, proverbs, rhymes, and other notable forms. The volume examines the role of elders and storytellers, the significance of mythology in understanding natural and social phenomena, and the ethical teachings embedded in folktales. Furthermore, it analyzes contemporary challenges facing these traditions and proposes strategies for their documentation and revitalization to ensure the survival of Kokborok's rich intangible heritage.

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1. Introduction

Oral traditions form the bedrock of indigenous identity among the Borok people of Tripura. Before the advent of written literature, knowledge systems, histories, values, and social norms were transmitted entirely through spoken word, embodying the collective memory of generations. Storytelling, myths,



songs, and ritualistic performances not only entertained but also educated, reinforced moral codes, through the Jadukolija, lullaby, elegy, proverbs, rhymes and preserved the philosophical worldview of the community.

In Borok society, oral tradition holds a sacred place, acting as a bridge between the past and the present. It was the primary means through which identity, language, and culture were maintained, especially during periods of social and political upheaval. Oral traditions offered resilience, adaptability, and a way for the Borok people to sustain their beliefs, customs, and linguistic heritage.

Elders and designated storytellers, often known for their oratorical skills and deep knowledge, played crucial roles in passing down these cultural treasures. Their performances were not casual acts but carefully curated renditions that followed traditional styles, melodies, and narrative structures. Stories were commonly shared during communal gatherings, seasonal festivals, and important life events such as births, marriages, deaths and harvest celebrations.

However, with the rise of formal education, modernization, and the influence of dominant cultures, traditional oral practices have been in decline. Yet, they continue to survive in rural areas and within families, where storytelling remains intertwined with everyday life and the practice of cultural traditions.

This volume aims to explore the richness of Kokborok myths, rituals, and oral traditions, illustrating how these cultural practices have shaped and continue to influence the social fabric of Tripura's indigenous communities.

2. Mythological Narratives in Kokborok

Mythology plays a central role in Kokborok oral traditions, offering profound insights into the Borok people's cosmology, spiritual beliefs, and social norms. These narratives often explain the origin of the world, the formation of natural elements, the relationships between humans and deities, and the foundational customs of the community. Myths serve not only as religious or spiritual explanations but also as a means to instill ethical values and collective memory.

Examples of Mythological Narratives:

i) Chethuang: This folktale tells the story of a brother and sister. The brother falls in love with his own sister and seeks the consent of their parents to marry her. However, the sister is unwilling to marry her brother. In her distress, she finds a *chethuang* plant, plants it in the yard, and begins to chant:



“Dada bai ano kainani hino lok chethuang lok” (“Oh! Chethuang plant, please grow tall and even taller, because they are going to marry me to my brother.”) As she chants, the *chethuang* tree grows taller and taller. Eventually, she climbs the tree and sacrifices her life, choosing death over marrying her own brother.

This folktale serves as a vessel of sacred wisdom and purity. It conveys timeless messages about the importance of upholding moral principles, respecting familial boundaries, valuing human connection with nature, and embracing bravery in the face of adversity. Through such narratives, audiences are inspired to cherish nature, honor family ties, and act with courage even in the most difficult circumstances.

ii) Mayung Kuphur: This folktale centers on two brothers, Rangiya and Jangiya (also called Butua), and highlights the bravery of the younger brother. When a princess goes missing, Rangiya sets out to rescue her, facing numerous challenges along the way, including fierce beasts and, ultimately, a malevolent white elephant that holds the princess captive. Through his courage and determination, Rangiya defeats the elephant, rescues the princess, and marries her—earning recognition as a heroic figure.

This story, like others in the Kokborok oral tradition, imparts deep wisdom about the value of courage, moral integrity, and the harmony between humans and nature. It encourages listeners to nurture their relationships, uphold ethical conduct, and bravely confront obstacles in life.

2.1 Creation Myths and Stories of Deities and Supernatural Beings

The Kokborok-speaking people possess several creation myths that recount the origins of the universe, the earth, rivers, mountains, and human beings. These stories often depict a harmonious relationship between humans, nature, and the divine forces governing them.

One significant myth tells of the deity ‘Bura Bwrwichuk’, the Great Mother Goddess, who is often invoked in stories related to fertility, harvest, and life cycles. In some narratives, Bura Bwrwichuk is believed to have shaped the earth and taught the Borok people essential survival skills like jhum cultivation and river fishing. Another myth speaks of Mayung Kuphur, a supernatural figure, who bridged the spiritual and human worlds, ensuring the balance between nature and society.



Supernatural beings like Haichuma and Chakbayama also populate the mythological landscape, embodying forces of nature that must be respected and appeased through rituals and taboos.

2.2 Legends Explaining Natural Phenomena and Tribal Customs

Many Kokborok myths serve to explain natural occurrences. Rivers, mountains, forests, and animals often have mythological stories attached to their origins. For instance, the story of Twima, a sacred river, narrates how it sprang forth from the tears of a sorrowful deity, symbolizing life, renewal, and the sacredness of water sources.

Similarly, tribal customs such as the Garia Puja—a festival of prosperity and harvest—have their roots in mythological tales where deities are believed to bestow blessings upon the land and people. Legends narrate how the Garia deity was pleased by offerings and dances, leading to abundant crops and good fortune. The Ker festival, centred on protecting the community from disease and disaster, is also deeply linked to myths about protective spirits and ancestral guardians.

Through these mythological narratives, the Borok people's deep reverence for nature, community solidarity, and respect for spiritual forces are vividly expressed, sustaining traditional knowledge systems even in contemporary times.

For example:

Goria songs, i) Oh! Goria Sengarw – e ghar ki?

Answer : Mayung

Answer - kaham kwrwng tondi ayung.

ii) Oh! Goria Sengarw – e ghar ki?

Answer - Mosok

Answer - Hapung hathai mai sok.

Here, Sengarw means sengkwrak (warrior),

Ayung: elder brother of father.

Mosok: bison

Sok: rotten, that means heavy paddy grown in the jhum fields.



3. Ritualistic Storytelling and Ceremonial Folklore

Storytelling in Kokborok culture is not limited to casual entertainment; it is deeply embedded in ritual practices and ceremonial traditions. Ritualistic storytelling often accompanies festivals, religious ceremonies, and rites of passage, serving both spiritual and educational purposes. These performances reaffirm communal bonds, transfer cultural knowledge, and invoke blessings from the deities.

For example: Goria, Chhakolok Mwtai, Ker Mwtai,

3.1 Oral Narratives Performed During Garia Puja, Ker and Mamita Festival

During the Garia Puja, one of the most important festivals of the Borok people, storytelling becomes an essential part of the rituals, the puja is performed by Elders, priests (Ochai), and community members narrate stories of Garia, the deity of prosperity and abundance, describing his gifts to humanity—tools for cultivation, domestic skills, and social harmony. Through dance, music, and storytelling, the participants celebrate the deity's blessings, ensuring a bountiful harvest and communal welfare.

The Ker festival is a solemn event where storytelling assumes a protective function. During this time, stories of ancestral spirits and divine protectors are recounted to invoke spiritual guardianship over the village. The narration of myths about the consequences of neglecting rituals acts as both a reminder and a reinforcement of cultural duties.

In the Mamita festival, which marks the completion of the jhum (slash-and-burn) cultivation season, storytelling once again plays a celebratory role. Narratives focus on the cycles of nature, agricultural wisdom, and ancestral gratitude. Songs and stories blend to honor the spirits of the land and ensure future fertility.

For examples:

Nokbrum brum Mamita birwi rwchablaio

Asin bai kartik nukhungni mwtai

Kangal Mamita biro.

Lampra uathop nokhwla mwchang

Ochai barua mwtaio mwchang.

Okwra chwrai chalaima panda



Sobai bwlaibai chakhwi mwturw

Swkang maikhwai bokdi.

This is a traditional folk song sung during the Mamita festival, which celebrates the household goddess *Mamita*. The song refers to the Bengali months of Asin and Kartik, which mark the harvesting season of the *jhum* (shifting cultivation) fields. This period is considered the most appropriate time for performing the Mamita rituals.

In the song, "*Lampra uathop*" describes the beautifully decorated yard prepared for the festival. "*Ochai*" and "*Barua*" are terms referring to ceremonial offerings or items, which are also beautifully arranged during the *puja* (ritual).

The festival includes feasting, especially for the elder children, who are first served a traditional dish made from bean leaves, known as *chakhwi mwturw*. The song reflects gratitude for the harvest and reverence toward the protective goddess, as well as the joy and unity of the community during this celebration.

3.2 The Intersection of Spiritual Beliefs and Folklore

In Kokborok culture, folklore is not separate from spirituality—it is a living medium through which religious beliefs are experienced and understood. Folktales often portray the moral consequences of disrespecting natural forces or neglecting ritual duties. Spirits such as Bolong Mwtai (forest spirit) or Twima (river deity), Noksuma, Thumnairog-Bonirog are frequent characters in these narratives, teaching respect for the environment and the unseen forces that govern it.

Ritualistic storytelling often serves to remind the community of its obligations to the spiritual world. The oral performance itself is seen as an offering, a sacred act that maintains the balance between the human, natural, and divine realms.

Through these ceremonies and oral traditions, the Borok people not only preserve their mythological heritage but also continuously renew their social and spiritual connections, keeping alive the invisible threads that bind past, present, and future, such as Jadukolija, tangbiti, lullaby, elegy, proverbs, and rhymes.

Some examples of Kokborok Oral Traditions

**1. Jadukolija (Incantation or Magical Verse)**

*"Oh Jadu, bisi puilani uatwi uamani,
 Patal pekhogwi khumung barsao,
 Ha silwi baro bari khumtoya,
 Bisi puilao baro."*

Translation:

Oh my dear, the first rain of the year has come. Many kinds of flowers bloom, bursting forth from the soil. The *Khumtoya* flower blossoms in the courtyard—truly a sign of the year's beginning.

2. Lullaby

*"Oh le - le -le - lei
 Rangchakni uaying rukphaini buduk
 Uaying duk romwi thudi.
 Saljora jora tokma kotogo
 Chemuk twinairog phaio."*

Translation:

Oh le-le-le-lei...

The cradle is made of gold, and its rope is silver. Sleep gently, holding onto the cradle's cord.
 As the hen squawks in the late morning, it is believed that the **Thumnairog** (household deities) arrive.

3. Elegy (Lamentation by a Wife for Her Deceased Husband)

*"Oh kolija... kolijawi
 Aswk dinno bachai kok sao
 Tini tamogwi saya.
 Phaidi achukdi kok salainani
 Kwnwi mai chalaianani.
 Oh kolija... kolijawi
 Bahai ang saichung tongnai."*

Translation:

Oh my heart... oh my dearest,
 So many days you spoke with me—why don't you speak now?



Come, sit beside me so we can talk and eat together.
Oh my love... oh my heart, how will I live alone now?

4. Proverbs:

i) "*Khorok thumta nugwise tongo,*
Thaipong rujudi hino."

— Seeing a bald head and suggesting carrying jackfruits on it.
(**Meaning:** Making unrealistic or inappropriate suggestions.)

ii) "*Hani kenjua mokolse kwrwi,*
Mokol chosma sano."

— The earthworm has no eyes, yet it asks for spectacles.
(**Meaning:** Demanding things beyond one's nature or capacity.)

iii) "*Ah roman hinkhe harepek nango.*"

— Not everything beautiful is meant to be owned.
(**Meaning:** Letting go of things that are not meant for you.)

5. Kokborok Rhymes

"Athukiri thui-thai,
Phantok bari dung-dang,
Rajkumarni bwsajwkle,
Rignai kanwibo yalw-lwk,
Risa sorwibo yalw-lwk,
Hapingni mwswi rangchakle,
Thungsa kwpal kwrwi."

Translation:

Twinkle-twinkle little star,
Dung-dang goes the brinjal yard,
The prince's daughter dresses so fine,
Wearing her *rignai*, she shines,
Wearing her *risa*, she shines again,



The golden deer of the deserted *jhum*,
Wanders with no fate.

4. Moral and Ethical Teachings in Folktales

Kokborok folktales are a vital medium for transmitting moral, ethical, and social values from one generation to the next. They serve not merely as a source of entertainment, but also as a powerful educational tool, offering guidance on how to live harmoniously within the community and in balance with the natural world.

Examples of such folktales include Tokma Auang Sukma, Bwrwichuk Bura Tha Kaima, Chethuang, Nuai, and Khumpui Barwrwk, each of which carries deep cultural meanings and lessons embedded within their narratives.

4.1 Lessons on Justice, Honor, and Communal Responsibility

Many Kokborok folktales revolve around themes of justice, honor, and communal welfare. These stories often illustrate the consequences of selfishness, greed, or dishonesty, while celebrating virtues such as generosity, bravery, and loyalty.

For example, the tale of Chethuang emphasizes the sacredness of familial bonds and the moral responsibility to act with integrity, even in the face of personal conflict. Similarly, stories featuring community leaders who forgo personal gain for the well-being of others highlight the core value of communal responsibility, which is central to traditional Borok society.

Characters in Kokborok folktales are rarely portrayed as solitary heroes. Instead, their success or failure is often determined by their relationships with others. Themes such as cooperation, respect for elders, and the fulfillment of social roles are consistently woven throughout these narratives. The character of Koromti, for instance, is depicted as pure and respectful, embodying the values of justice, honor, and communal responsibility that these folktales seek to impart.

4.2 How Folktales Preserve Historical and Social Values

Beyond moral instruction, Kokborok folktales serve as repositories of historical memory and social norms. They encapsulate indigenous knowledge about traditional laws, social hierarchies, gender roles, and survival strategies. For example, oral legends surrounding the origins of Garia Puja not only reflect



deep religious devotion but also preserve insights into ancient agricultural practices, political history, and the importance of communal rituals in securing collective well-being.

Many of these tales emphasize environmental ethics, teaching respect for forests, rivers, and wildlife. Violating natural laws—such as cutting down sacred trees like *Chethuang*—is often portrayed as inviting divine punishment or misfortune, reinforcing the sacred relationship between humans and nature.

In a time when formal written records were scarce, these folktales functioned as living archives, preserving the indigenous knowledge systems, history, and values of Tripura in ways that were accessible to all, regardless of age or literacy.

One prominent example is the legend of Baba Garia, which is tied to the historical foundation of the Tipra Era. According to oral tradition, Baba Garia was brought from the Naga Hills following a victorious campaign against the Naga tribe. Around the same time, King Jojaropha is said to have triumphed in a battle against East Pakistan. Because of these concurrent victories, Baba Garia came to symbolize victory, wealth, and divine prosperity.

The bearers of the Garia deity are referred to as Garia Sengarw, derived from *Sengkwak*, meaning "mighty warrior." To commemorate these events, King Jojaropha established the Tipra Era. Even today, traces of this history are found in Garia songs, such as the Bengali line: "Ailamre, ailamre Baba Garia desh berai" ("I have arrived, I have arrived—Baba Garia travels across the land").

5. Challenges in Preserving Oral Traditions

Despite the enduring significance of oral traditions in Kokborok culture, several challenges threaten their survival in the modern era. Societal changes, technological advancements, and shifting values have all contributed to the decline of traditional storytelling practices.

5.1 Decline of Storytelling Practices in Modern Society

One of the most pressing challenges is the gradual disappearance of traditional storytellers, known for their role as cultural custodians. In earlier times, storytelling sessions were communal events, held in village courtyards, fields, and family gatherings, particularly during evenings or festivals. Today, modern entertainment—television, mobile phones, and the internet—has largely replaced these



gatherings. The younger generation, influenced by global cultures and urbanization, is becoming increasingly disconnected from the oral traditions of their ancestors.

The migration of youth to urban areas for education and employment has further widened this gap. As elders pass away without transmitting their stories, an irreplaceable wealth of cultural knowledge is at risk of being lost forever.

5.2 The Need for Documentation and Research in Folklore Studies

Another significant challenge lies in the lack of systematic documentation and academic research focused on Kokborok folklore. While some efforts have been made by individuals, organizations, and academic institutions, much of the oral tradition remains undocumented. Many stories, songs, proverbs, and rituals are passed orally and are vulnerable to alteration or complete disappearance over time.

Without proper recording and study, important variations, original versions, and contextual meanings risk being diluted or misrepresented. Moreover, the absence of structured folklore curricula in schools and universities limits awareness and appreciation among students.

To counter these trends, it is crucial to prioritize fieldwork, audio-visual recordings, community-based research projects, and publications in both Kokborok and other accessible languages. Encouraging young researchers to engage with elders and tradition bearers is essential for preserving the authenticity and richness of these narratives.

6. Conclusion

Oral traditions form the life blood of Kokborok culture, serving as a vital medium for preserving history, transmitting moral values, and reinforcing the collective identity of the Borok people. From the creation myths that explain the origins of the world to ritualistic storytelling during festivals like Garia Puja, Ker, and Mamita, these narratives have sustained the social fabric of Tripura's indigenous communities for centuries.

However, modernization, globalization, and the disconnection between generations have posed serious threats to the survival of these traditions. As story telling practices diminish and younger generations gravitate toward modern forms of communication and entertainment, the risk of losing valuable cultural heritage grows ever more imminent.



To safeguard these oral traditions, a concerted effort is required. Community-driven initiatives must prioritize story telling events, folklore documentation, and cultural education. Schools and universities should integrate Kokborok oral traditions into their curricula to foster appreciation among students. Researchers, writers, and cultural activists need to continue recording, translating, and analyzing these traditions with sensitivity and respect for their original contexts.

Moreover, leveraging digital platforms—such as podcasts, films, Facebook, Google, and YouTube—allows traditional narratives to adapt to modern times without losing their authenticity. These mediums offer powerful tools for documenting, sharing, and revitalizing Kokborok oral traditions, making them accessible to younger generations and global audiences alike.

Partnerships with government agencies, NGOs, and international cultural organizations can provide essential support and funding for long-term preservation and promotion initiatives, ensuring that these rich traditions continue to thrive in the digital age.

In this way, the oral traditions of Kokborok can not only survive but thrive, enriching both local communities and the wider world with their timeless wisdom, creativity, and spirit. By valuing the past, we lay the foundation for a future where the voices of the Borok ancestors continue to inspire generations to come.

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