



A Descriptive Study of Kokborok (Tripuri) Riddles: Form, Function, and Cultural Significance

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ABSTRACT

Riddles constitute an essential component of oral literature across cultures, functioning as tools of entertainment, education, and cognitive development. Among the indigenous communities of Tripura, the Tripuri people possess a rich tradition of riddles in their native language, Kokborok. This paper presents a descriptive study of Kokborok riddles, examining their structure, thematic patterns, linguistic features, and socio-cultural functions. It explores how riddles serve as a medium for transmitting indigenous knowledge, moral values, and environmental awareness. The study also highlights the role of riddles in preserving cultural identity in the face of modernization. By analyzing selected examples, this paper demonstrates the enduring relevance of Kokborok riddles in both traditional and contemporary contexts.

Introduction

Oral literature forms the backbone of many indigenous cultures, preserving knowledge, traditions, and collective memory. Among the Tripuri community of Tripura, riddles occupy a significant place within oral traditions. These riddles, expressed in Kokborok, are not merely forms of amusement but also act as vehicles of cultural expression and intellectual engagement.

Traditionally, riddles are shared in informal settings such as family gatherings, community events, and agricultural activities. They encourage critical thinking, observation, and creativity, particularly among children and youth. Despite their importance, Kokborok riddles have received limited scholarly attention compared to other forms of folklore such as myths and songs.



This study aims to document and analyze Kokborok riddles from a descriptive perspective, focusing on their linguistic features, thematic diversity, and cultural functions. It also seeks to understand their role in sustaining the socio-cultural identity of the Tripuri people in a rapidly changing world.

In Kokborok, the term for “riddle” is Phumukmung. In certain regions, it is also referred to as Phemlokmung. Both Phumukmung and Phemlokmung carry the same meaning and are used interchangeably. However, contemporary scholars and writers tend to prefer Phumukmung as the standard term for “riddle.”

The term phemlakmung, however, is used in Kokborok with two distinct meanings: first, in the sense of a riddle, and second, in the sense of humor or playful satire. For example, in the sentence, “Do, nana, phemlakmung thaisa sanaba,” it means, “Grandmother, please tell me a riddle.” In this context, the word clearly denotes a riddle. On the other hand, in the sentence, “Da kosom, mansengla bono tamswk phemlokkhaba,” it conveys the meaning, “Why did you make such playful or humorous remarks when you got the chance?” Here, the term expresses a sense of satire or humor.

Therefore, it may be argued that Phemlakmung is more appropriately used to denote humor or wit, while Phumukmung should be considered the proper term for “riddle.”

In the Bengali language, a subtle distinction can be drawn between “riddle” (dhadha) and “enigma” (prahelika). However, such a distinction is not present in Kokborok. Whether it corresponds to “riddle” or “enigma” in Bengali, Kokborok employs a single term—phumukmung.

From a contextual perspective, however, phumukmung in Kokborok can be broadly classified into two types:

General Riddle – These are commonly used riddles that are shared in everyday settings and are widely known across different regions.

Contextual or Performative Riddle– These are of a slightly different nature. They are performed in a question-and-answer format, often sung during work in the jhum fields. The responses to these riddles are also delivered through song, creating a rhythmic and interactive form of expression.

The early life of the Tripuri people was characterized by a form of primitive communism, or a primitive egalitarian social system. Within this system, mutual cooperation was a fundamental principle—people helped one another to the best of their abilities, worked collectively, went on group hunting expeditions,



and shared the meat obtained from hunting among themselves. In other words, a strong tradition of collective living and shared consumption prevailed.

Traces of this tradition have not entirely disappeared even today. In many hilly tribal areas, although not practiced in its full form, elements of this communal system still exist. However, over time, the influence of capitalism has gradually penetrated the socio-economic life of the Tripuri community. As a result, they have increasingly moved away from their traditional egalitarian social structure.

With the expansion of a capitalist social system in India and the undeniable spread of capitalist influences, even smaller indigenous communities within the country have begun to experience significant transformations in their traditional ways of life.

Kokborok riddles may be described as metaphorical in nature because the intended object, animal, or person is revealed indirectly through a figurative covering or symbolic representation. This “covering” constitutes the metaphor itself. However, it is also observed that some Phumukmung are expressed in a simple and direct manner without relying heavily on metaphor. Such forms are equally significant and should not be overlooked.

In many cases, providing answers to metaphorically rich and symbolically encoded phumukmung is not easy. This difficulty arises because the meanings and interpretations of riddles often vary from one group or region to another. The relationship between the upamana (the image or comparison) and the upameya (the subject being described)—that is, the metaphorical framework—differs according to regional traditions.

As a result, deciphering the underlying metaphor to arrive at the correct answer becomes a challenging task. Since individuals are not always familiar with the cultural and traditional contexts of other groups or regions, interpreting such riddles becomes even more difficult. Consequently, in many instances, it is not possible for individuals to determine the correct answers to the questions posed in Phumukmung.

Since Kokborok phumukmung are expressed through a metaphorical and symbolic mode of language, they provide a significant opportunity for the exercise and development of intellect. These riddles may be composed on virtually any subject matter, without strict criteria or limitations regarding selection. However, their effectiveness largely depends on their social relevance and functional utility within the community. Consequently, the scope for intellectual engagement and cognitive development through riddles becomes extensive.



It is evident from earlier discussions that riddles are not merely tools for testing intelligence; they also embody cultural memory and traditional knowledge. Their association with particular groups or communities reflects inherited traditions, accumulated experiences, and collective identity. At the same time, certain riddles contain elements that may appear crude or inconsistent, which should be regarded as one of their distinctive compositional characteristics rather than a limitation.

In Kokborok riddles, a significant emphasis is placed on objects and materials that are essential to natural and domestic life. These elements are often imagined as possessing inherent strength or qualities that support human existence. Within the realm of imagination, such objects are frequently depicted as growing, expanding, or evolving.

Non-human elements such as trees, flowers, fruits, and other natural entities are often used as metaphors for inanimate objects. Conversely, human attributes are sometimes attributed to inanimate objects, thereby blurring the boundaries between human and non-human domains. As a result, in Kokborok riddles, humans, objects, and the natural world are interchangeable and can symbolically represent one another.

Furthermore, household tools, domestic items, and agricultural implements also occupy a central place as subjects of riddles. These objects are often imbued with lifelike qualities, and their descriptions may include references to biological processes such as growth, development, life, and death. Through metaphorical imagination, these objects appear to acquire the full range of human characteristics. It is for this reason that in Kokborok phumukmung, one entity is frequently represented through another, functioning as its metaphorical equivalent.

Ordinary riddles are not used in this manner; rather, their distinctive features are quite amusing and culturally significant. For instance, during a riddle competition held either in a household or in the jhum fields, if a participant fails to answer a particular phumukmung, the questioner addresses the respondent by saying: “Da, moni saklaimao manliyakhaba ano’ kuk charidita.”

The approximate Bengali sense of this statement is: “Alright, if you are unable to answer this riddle, you must offer me a ‘kuk.’” The term kuk refers to a grasshopper. In this context, however, kuk symbolically represents a form of exchange or compensation given in return for the answer. It may be interpreted as a token offering, and in a broader sense, even likened to a form of informal reward or “fee.”

Initially, the respondent is reluctant to provide this kuk or offering, and continues to reflect in an attempt to find the answer. Nevertheless, if they ultimately fail, they are obliged to “offer the kuk.” This act



becomes a necessary gesture of acknowledgment toward the questioner. In another sense, offering the kuk signifies an acceptance of defeat. Upon conceding, the respondent may say: “Da, nini kokno nangthun, hindi ang nono kuk masa rikha. Tobo ano’ sajadi, o phumukmung tamo wngnai”.

This may be translated as: “Alright, I accept your condition and offer you a ‘kuk.’ Now, please kindly tell me the answer to this riddle.”

Even then, the questioner is not immediately satisfied. They may further ask what type of kuk (grasshopper) the respondent intends to offer. There are various kinds of kuk, such as Kuyung, Kukthok, Kuktakhum, and others. The respondent must specify one of these types. In some cases, the questioner may even insist on a particular type according to their own preference.

In order to obtain the answer from the riddle-maker, the respondent ultimately offers a kuk or a token of their choice, as preferred by the questioner. This process resembles a form of negotiation or bargaining.

In a broader sense, it may even remind us of the various forms of negotiation and exchange found in contemporary practices such as bribery. However, in this context, it is purely symbolic and metaphorical. The primary purpose is to create an atmosphere of humor, amusement, and playful interaction. Through this process, both the riddle-maker and the respondent derive genuine enjoyment.

At this point, the respondent or listener has little choice. Some participants accept all the conditions imposed by the riddle-maker in the hope of obtaining the answer, effectively surrendering to the process. Others, however, refuse to comply, and in such cases, the answer remains undisclosed.

As part of the imposed conditions, the respondent is required to carry the bones and skin of the grasshopper in a basket and cross a river accompanied by a person of the opposite sex. Notably, the selected companion is often someone with whom such an act would be considered socially inappropriate or unacceptable. In other words, the pairing deliberately violates established social norms and conventions.

For instance, if the respondent is a woman, she may be asked to cross the river with a man related to her by affinity in a socially restricted manner—such as her father-in-law, her husband’s elder brother, or the husband of a close female relative. Conversely, if the respondent is a man, he may be required to cross the river with his mother-in-law, his younger brother’s wife, or his wife’s elder sister. In some cases, even more socially sensitive pairings are suggested, such as a father-in-law crossing the river with his son’s wife, or a mother-in-law with her daughter’s husband.



Such pairings are clearly not acceptable within the moral framework of society. The act of “crossing the river” symbolically implies an intimacy comparable to that of husband and wife. At a deeper level, it signifies the idea of living together in close physical and emotional proximity over an extended period—essentially, sharing the journey of life as a married couple.

Therefore, many participants choose not to pursue the answer to the riddle through such conditions. Instead, they prioritize social norms, moral values, and a sense of modesty. Out of respect for societal decorum and personal dignity, they refrain from accepting these challenging and symbolically transgressive conditions.

As a result, many participants refrain from fulfilling such conditions and choose not to seek the answer from the questioner. In this context, the phrase “twibarna” (crossing the river) is used as a significant symbolic expression. Beneath its metaphorical layer, it implies conduct akin to that of a husband and wife—that is, the notion of conjugal or married life.

Consequently, many individuals are unwilling to accept such socially unacceptable or non-normative implications, as they conflict with established moral codes and societal conventions. Even if someone agrees to such conditions, it often leads to embarrassment. The situation becomes a source of amusement for others, who engage in laughter, teasing, and satire at the expense of the respondent. Mockery and sarcastic remarks are directed toward the individual, making it difficult for them to maintain social dignity, and in some cases, even to face others in the community for several days.

Moreover, such incidents tend to spread rapidly in jhum fields and other workspaces, becoming popular topics of conversation and prolonged ridicule. Although the correct answer to the riddle may eventually be revealed, enduring such humiliation for the sake of solving a single Fumukmukt can be quite difficult.

Nature and Characteristics of Kokborok Riddles

Kokborok riddles are typically short, metaphorical statements or questions that describe an object, phenomenon, or concept in an indirect manner. The listener is required to interpret the clues and identify the correct answer.

These riddles are characterized by:

- Brevity and simplicity
- Use of metaphor and symbolism



- Rhythmic and poetic structure
- Reliance on everyday experiences

For example, a riddle may describe a natural object such as the moon, a household item, or an animal in a figurative way. The simplicity of language makes them accessible, while the layered meanings challenge the intellect.

Types and Thematic Patterns

Kokborok riddles can be broadly classified based on their themes:

a. Nature-Based Riddles

Given the close relationship between the Tripuri people and their environment, many riddles are based on natural elements such as the sun, moon, rivers, trees, and animals. These riddles reflect ecological knowledge and environmental awareness.

b. Household and Agricultural Riddles

Riddles often revolve around daily life, including tools, utensils, and agricultural practices like jhum cultivation. Such riddles serve to familiarize younger generations with traditional livelihoods.

c. Human Body and Social Life

Some riddles describe parts of the human body or social roles in metaphorical terms. These riddles highlight the importance of observation and analogy.

d. Abstract and Moral Riddles

Certain riddles convey moral lessons or philosophical ideas, encouraging reflection and ethical thinking.

Linguistic Features

The linguistic structure of Kokborok riddles reveals several noteworthy features:

- **Metaphorical Language:** Objects are described through imaginative comparisons.
- **Parallelism:** Repetition of similar structures enhances rhythm and memorability.
- **Alliteration and Sound Patterns:** These contribute to the aesthetic quality of riddles.



- **Contextual Vocabulary:** Words related to nature, agriculture, and daily life dominate.

The use of Kokborok in riddles helps preserve linguistic richness and supports language transmission across generations.

Functions of Riddles in Tripuri Society

a. Educational Function

Riddles play a significant role in informal education. They develop cognitive skills such as reasoning, memory, and problem-solving. Children learn about their environment and culture in an engaging manner.

b. Entertainment

Riddles are a popular form of entertainment during leisure time. They create a sense of enjoyment and foster social interaction.

c. Cultural Transmission

Through riddles, knowledge about traditions, customs, and values is passed down from one generation to another. They act as repositories of cultural wisdom.

d. Social Cohesion

Riddle sessions encourage participation and communication, strengthening community bonds.

Performance Context

Kokborok riddles are traditionally performed in oral settings. Elders often initiate riddle sessions, and younger participants respond with answers. This interactive process creates a dynamic learning environment.

Riddles are commonly shared:

- During evening gatherings
- In agricultural fields
- At festivals and social events



The performance context enhances their impact and ensures active participation.

Cultural Significance

Riddles are deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of the Tripuri community. They reflect:

- Ecological knowledge
- Social norms and values
- Historical experiences
- Collective identity

In many cases, riddles encode practical knowledge, such as identifying plants or understanding natural phenomena.

Impact of Modernization

Modernization has significantly affected the transmission of oral traditions. Factors such as formal education, digital media, and urbanization have reduced the frequency of traditional riddle sessions.

However, efforts are being made to preserve Kokborok riddles through documentation, publication, and inclusion in educational curricula. Cultural organizations and scholars are working to revive interest in indigenous oral literature.

Preservation and Documentation

Preserving Kokborok riddles requires systematic documentation and community participation. Institutions such as the Anthropological Survey of India and local cultural bodies have contributed to recording tribal folklore.

Educational initiatives promoting Kokborok also play a crucial role in sustaining this tradition. Digital platforms can further enhance accessibility and awareness.

Some Kokborok Riddles:

“Kwrwikhe wngya, mokol bai nukya.”

Translation: “It cannot exist without it, yet it cannot be seen with the eyes.”
In this riddle, the referent is air. The subject is presented in a very simple manner. While emphasizing the



mysterious nature of air, the riddle conveys that although air is essential for existence, it remains invisible to the human eye.

“Phantak bario kolompa kiyona.”

Translation: “In the brinjal field, there is a ‘kolompa kiyona’ (a beautiful bride).” Here, the term kiyona means “bride,” while kolompa refers to an exceptionally beautiful woman or bride.

In this riddle, the stars in the sky are metaphorically imagined as a beautiful bride (kolompa kiyona). At the same time, the sky is conceptualized as a brinjal field. In other words, the sky is likened to a cultivated field of brinjals, within which the stars reside as beautiful brides.

“Mwswi rangchak kharririk, tokha kosom barrwrwk.”

Translation: “As the golden deer runs, the black crow sits.”

Answer: The condition during the burning phase of jhum cultivation (huk sokmani in Kokborok).

This riddle reflects the jhum-based livelihood and agricultural practices of the indigenous Tripuri people. It symbolically represents an important aspect of their socio-economic life. In this metaphor, fire is imagined as a “golden deer,” while the charred remains of burnt vegetation—ash and charcoal—are compared to “black crows.”

Beyond its literal meaning, the riddle also carries deeper philosophical and spiritual implications. It signifies the cycle of destruction and renewal—the death of the old and the birth of the new. The emergence of new life often depends upon the sacrifice of the old. In the context of jhum cultivation, the destruction of existing vegetation is necessary for the growth of new crops. Without this process, renewal would not be possible.

Thus, the “golden deer” (fire) must pass away, leaving behind only charcoal and ash. Yet, from this apparent destruction, new life emerges in the form of green crops, which in turn sustain other forms of life. The riddle, therefore, encapsulates a profound ecological and philosophical understanding of life cycles within the Tripuri worldview.

“Tan khe’ yong kwlaio.”

Translation: “When cut or pierced, worms appear.”

Answer: This refers to the sowing of seeds in jhum cultivation using a digging tool (damra).



In this riddle, seeds are metaphorically imagined as worms. The act of piercing or cutting the soil for sowing seeds creates the impression that worms are emerging from the ground. Here, inanimate objects (seeds) are attributed with characteristics of living beings, suggesting movement and life.

This metaphor reflects the imaginative perception of agricultural practices, where seeds, though inanimate, are symbolically portrayed as living organisms. The comparison emphasizes the intimate relationship between human activity, nature, and life processes within the jhum cultivation system.

Conclusion

Kokborok riddles represent a vital aspect of Tripuri oral literature, combining entertainment with education and cultural preservation. Their metaphorical richness, thematic diversity, and social functions highlight their importance in the life of the Tripuri community.

Despite the challenges posed by modernization, riddles continue to hold relevance as tools of cognitive development and cultural expression. Preserving this tradition requires collective efforts from communities, scholars, and policymakers.

By documenting and analyzing Kokborok riddles, this study contributes to the broader understanding of indigenous knowledge systems and emphasizes the need to safeguard intangible cultural heritage for future generations.

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