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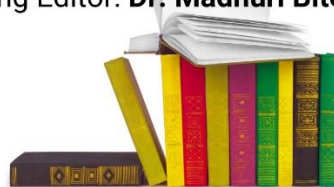
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Folk Beliefs as Reflected in the Rituals of Hill Tribes of Tripura: With Special References to Boroks

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Abstract:

This paper attempts to study how folk beliefs are reflected in the rituals of the Boroks of Tripura. Boroks are one of the prominent tribal communities living in different parts of Tripura. Rituals are integral to their lives, encapsulating their ideas of family welfare, life-cycle, and agriculture. Oral verses, folk dances, and ballads are key elements of each ritual while an *anochai* performs it, sacrificing different objects. The Boroks believe that ritual performances are the only way to propitiate benign deities and keep evil forces at bay. These rituals play an important role in constituting their ethnic and social identity. The rituals uphold and express different folk beliefs, cosmological views, and relations with nature. Without studying the rituals of the Boroks, it is almost impossible to comprehend their individual and collective communal psyche and their philosophy of life. However, today, due to the impact of modernity, education, and proselytisation, such age-old oral traditions are on the verge of extinction. The unique Borok culture is facing extinction and homogenisation in the name of progress and prosperity. This study tries to document the folk beliefs associated with Borok rituals and present them in this paper.

Keywords: Traditional beliefs, ritual, refugee, migration, Borok people.

1. Introduction

Tripura is one of the eight states of the northeast and home to twenty indigenous communities: Tripuri, Jamatia, Reang, Uchoi, Noatia, Orang, Mog, Chakma, Lushai, Garo, Bhil, Santal, Lepcha, Halam, Bhutia, Kuki, Chaimal, Khasia, and Munda. All these tribes may linguistically be divided into three groups: the Tibetan-Burman group, the Kuki-Chin group, and the Arakan group. There are a total of nine clans or sub-tribes speaking Kokborok, which is a Tibeto-Burman language. The Kokborok-speaking tribes are (1) Tripuri, (2) Reang, (3) Jamatia, (4) Noatia, (5) Uchoi, (6) Rupini, (8) Debbaram, and (9) Murasing. *All these nine clans or sub-tribes are addressed as “Borok,” “Twiprasa,” and “Tripuri.”*

In this paper, I have tried to restrict my scope to the study of folk beliefs of those Kokborok-speaking people who write ‘*Tripura*’ as their surname and reside within the south district of Tripura. Hence, my usage of the generic term Borok is to identify this group of people only since ‘*Tripura*’ is one of the largest among all the sub-tribes of the Kokborok-speaking communities. The members of this group are seen to reside mostly in the South and Dhalai districts of the state. Apart from Tripura, the Tripuri people also inhabit Assam, the Garo Hills of Meghalaya, the Chittagong Hill Tract, and Sylhet District of Bangladesh. However, it is worth mentioning that all the Kokborok-speaking subgroups share similar traditions, customs, beliefs, rites, rituals, and ceremonies with minor variations. Nonetheless, instead of identifying with their sub-tribe nomenclatures, all the Kokborok-speaking sub-tribes prefer to be addressed as the ‘*Boroks*.’ It is in this spirit that the present study also uses the generic term ‘*Borok*’ for discussing the ‘*Tripura*’ tribe in particular.

Though Boroks are one of the prominent tribal groups in Tripura, no research has been conducted on their rituals. Rituals are generally performed orally and connected to different aspects of their lives. Over decades, many such traditional customs have been forgotten and

are no longer practiced. As a result, many rituals are on the verge of extinction. The present generation is unfamiliar with the folk traditions related to beliefs and customs. They are reluctant to follow and observe the rites and rituals that are performed for the welfare of the family members.

2. Folk Beliefs

The term folk belief was first coined in 1892 by English folklorist Lawrence Gomme. Folk belief is a genre of folklore that is often expressed in narratives, customs, rituals, foodways, proverbs, and rhymes. It also includes a wide variety of behaviours, expressions, and beliefs. All cultures possess a variety of beliefs that can be classified as folk beliefs, common beliefs, or popular beliefs. These beliefs are not necessarily founded on scientific evidence, but they are widely acknowledged as truth by the majority of tribal people. In a culture, folk beliefs can be found in many different ways. Some remain private and are unknown only within the group, while others have become more visible. Folk beliefs and practices are a rich tapestry of cultural stories and activities that echo societies' histories, cultural identities, and collective wisdom. Most of the folk beliefs are ritualistic actions or customs that have been passed down through generations. They range from daily routines, like greetings and eating habits, to yearly festivals and ceremonies.

The Western term religion is derived from the Latin word "religare, meaning "to bind together". The meaning of the word religion is completely distinct from an indigenous belief system or a folk belief in terms of origin, meaning, connotation, philosophy, worship, and understanding. Therefore, a community belief system can only be conceptualised or described by a native term that provides a comprehensive connotation. Usually, a folk belief system is traced through folk music, folktales, riddles, myths, and rituals.

The Borok people also have their own term known as '*mwtai*,' which is a collective term that describes the traditional belief system or religious activities of the community. The Borok people have many different folk beliefs and rituals that are performed in different aspects of their lives. Their traditional deities or gods and goddesses are invoked in the form of bamboo altars. There is no script to perform any rituals, but some words and performances are enacted by the priest while performing a ritual. The beliefs and practices of the Borok people can only be understood through some religious features. The following are some of the unique features of the folk beliefs of the Boroks:

- The Borok religious faith is polytheistic. They have several deities who are invoked for the welfare of the family members.
- They practice omen in every ritual using different parts of certain animals like fowl, goat, pigeon, pig, etc., like the intestine, head, blood, and sometimes mimicking the sounds that animals make.
- Recitation of specific folktales is one of the essential ritualistic aspects of the Borok people. Folktales are worshipped as living souls. It is said that the souls of the folk tales are capable of harming humans, and so they must be followed properly to avoid their ill effects. For instance, the *nokkuruima* is one such tale that must be sung, keeping in mind all taboos required by the tale. Sometimes, there are certain words in the tale that must be skipped to protect the listeners from any misfortune from the characters of the tale.
- Brewed rice beer is another religious feature of the Borok people, and without it, not even a single deity can be worshipped. It is required from the day of birth to the day of death in their lives.
- Unlike in most cultures of the tribal communalities where the symbols of the supreme deities are made either by a blacksmith or made of bamboo, the deities in the Borok

people are not made by anyone or made of bamboo either but received in a dream by 'Thakur,' who is believed to be the actual owner of the deity or god.

- There is a practice known as '*matri*' followed by the members of the tribe. It is believed that there are a total of sixteen hundred different types of *matris*, a kind of disease caused by evil spirits and afflicting at different age levels. That usually causes the teenagers and adults to have mental illness, physical disabilities, and ultimately death. For example, a newly born baby not taking its mother's breast is a part of the *matris*.
- Animistic faith is one of the common features of the Boroks. They believe in and worship Mother Nature. They worship mountains, plants, rivers, streams, animals, caves, stones, the moon, the sun, etc.

All these folk religious features are related to their lives, personal experiences, reminiscences, human imaginations and perceptions, and cultural lore and are in unscripted forms and reflected in various rituals that constitute the socio-cultural and religious life of the community.

3. Rituals of Boroks

Usually, Borok's rituals are associated with songs, dance, poetic chanting, ballads, and folktales performed while invoking the deities. There are different types of rituals: family welfare, life-cycle, and agricultural-related rituals performed by shamans known as *ochai*, *tansrai*, and *romsrai*. All these rituals are performed in the form of oral narratives, sacrificial rites, and poetic chanting, which play a crucial role in society to this day. All these rituals are symbolic and represent important cultural meanings. According to Clark, ritual is that:

“Religious ritual is not just a series of actions performed for their own sake. These acts are symbolic; that is, they refer to things other than themselves, and this reference is always something in the world of the gods.” (Clark 27).

According to Durkheim, ritual is that:

“Ritual is a determined mode of actions. The reference or object of ritual is the belief system of a society, which is constituted by a classification of everything into the two realms of the sacred and profane” (Durkheim 43).

Some of the rituals of Boroks are as follows:

3.1. *Lampra*: The actual meaning of *lampra* is ‘*lam*, meaning ways, and ‘*pra*, meaning deity, so its meaning is the deity who shows ways to welfare. This ritual is performed on several occasions, like birth, marriage, and death ceremonies for purification and welfare. For instance, when a groom is about to get married, then he observes this ritual to get welfare for newly married life. In this ritual, two deities are invoked, namely *Lampra* and *Lampui*, by sacrificing chickens and offering rice beers. Before this ritual is performed, the householder has to ferment rice beers to offer to the deities *Lampra* and *Lampui*, who are siblings. The two deities cannot be invoked without offering rice beer and sacrificing chickens.

3.2. *Shany puja*: Apart from invoking the traditional deities, the Borok people also worship the god *Shani*. The Borok people worship the god on Saturday. They worship the god in two ways: one is called *sadha* (involving no sacrifice), and another is called *thakur puja* (with sacrifice). The householder invites a priest to perform the ritual. In the case of the former ritual, no idol or image is used, but a steel glass full of water is kept on some paddy. In the glass, a mango stem with three to five or seven leaves is

put. In the case of *thakur puja*, a *thorai* (a container made of banana leaf to collect the sacrificed blood) is made and is kept near the *pakhak* (the instrument on which the he-goat is beheaded). The priest asks his assistant, known as *Tansrai*, to behead the he-goat after chanting some mantras. After beheading the he-goat, the blood is collected in the *thorai* (a container made of banana plant's leaf) to find signs of good omen and bad omen for the family members.

3.3. *Kalio pun tannai*: It is seen that in most of the Borok localities, there is a temple dedicated to Devi Kaali. No idol or image is placed inside the temple. During fieldwork, I had asked a priest why no idol or image is worshipped in the form of a deity. He replied that they worship the soil that is offered in dreams by the Goddess. He also said that during his grandfather's time, there was a sudden chronic death in the village. When his grandfather visited a sage, he was told to worship Devi Kaali in the form of soil. He gave a lump of soil to him to place it in his village. By worshipping that deity, further deaths were prevented. Even when Boroks migrate from one place to another, they carry the soil with them.

3.4 *Nok bondhkhainai*: The literal meaning of *Nok bondhkhainai* is safeguarding the house. This is performed to protect the house from evil spirits. The Borok people believe that it is necessary to keep the house safe and protected from evil spirits and witches. To perform this ritual, a priest is invited as a courtesy. The priest comes at midnight of a full moon or new moon or Tuesday or Saturday. Before he comes at midnight, he comes once in the evening and does a ritual which is known as *Srini toksa*. He gives some holy rice to all the family members of the house. After that, the priest goes to the jungle alone, taking a chicken to sacrifice. After performing this ritual, the priest does not come back to the house. He comes back at midnight naked

with some amount of charmed rice in his hands. There should not be any light inside the house. He walks around the house and spreads rice by chanting mantras. When he keeps walking around the house, no one is allowed to remain outside the house.

3.5. *Garia*: *Garia* is a ritual performed annually by a family. This ritual continues either for three, five, or seven days depending on the omen. It is also performed if the householder had made a *manatā* or the members of the clan are traditionally invoking the deity *Garia*. The deity *Garia* is invoked in the month of *Chaitra*, and the puja ends in the month of *Baisakh*. The symbol of the deity is an iron spear not made by any blacksmith but offered in a dream. The ritual begins in the evening in the courtyard of the householder, and then it is taken house to house. The ritual is performed in all the houses of several villages and returned back to the main householder early in the morning. The ritual is performed by a group of ritual specialists known as Hodder, Ochai, Tansrai, Baien, and Banadari, all of whom have different roles in the ritual. In this ritual, chickens, boars, and eggs are sacrificed while performing the ritual by chanting some holy words in poetic form. Participants sing songs. Some songs sung by the participants are as follows:

Song-1

Ahhh ani lakhicharainibuma,

ninimwkhangukyakhelangma se phaya,

phwngboaiya, saalkaya ,

aswknaithoknok taal bo se paya,

nana mankhale ani kha kwloptaninainono,

oh laxi, charainibumamayaganhama...

Translated version:

*Oh my dear cute babe,
I can't breathe if I don't see your face,
You are more beautiful than the moon,
If I get you, I shall keep you on my bosom,
Oh dear cute babe.*

Some romantic tunes are also played by the flute. The flute is made of *mooli* bamboo.

Apart from singing songs, the boys also mock jokes in this way;

"Kungti lope lope o paranisikliroknisitati lope lope"

Translated version

*"When one gets cold then a mucus fluid comes of nose similarly, this village girls'
urethral (a part of vagina) is also coming out".*

There are also satirical jokes cracked in the form of short songs sung by boys addressed to the girls of the village to embarrass them. They dance and sing songs relating to sexuality and satire. For example,

"Thaichamaithaio, thaio, hatungparanisiklarokbahapwngnaikhalaikhio"

Translated version

*"As the thachamai (a kind of jungle fruit) are blossomed continuously down the hills
Similarly, the young girls of the hilly village do toilet facing the down road"*

“Lama kukui mukui,

Ohparanisiklaroknihapok kukui mukui”

Translated version:

“As the road of the village is crooked

Similarly, the vaginas of the girls of this village are also crooked”

Apart from these above-cited sexual connotations, there are more aspects connected to puberty that are usually found in the ritual. Since the deity is taken from family to family for worshipping, on such occasions the boys also look for girls for love and marriage. They gossip with girls and cook together. Sometimes, through a rite known as *alom lanai* (taking blessing from elders) that is performed by couples while invoking the deity in a house, the boys sing songs and crack satirical jokes over the couple. At the time, the boys sing together and dance together to express their love and emotion.

4. Objective of the study

- To know how the folk beliefs and practices are reflected in the rituals of the Boroks.
- To find out what important aspects lie behind performing the rituals.
- To know, preserve, and explore the extinct folk beliefs by documentation.

5. Methodology

The prime objective of this paper is to study how folk beliefs are reflected in the Borok's rituals. In order to conduct the research, I had undertaken ethnographic fieldwork as a research method to learn about the beliefs, rituals, and lives of the Boroks who are concentrated in South Tripura. I had observed many rituals in which the religious faiths are reflected. I had visited several villages under the South district of Tripura. Almost 16 villages were visited by me to collect data. Therefore, I had to adopt different types of methods like

participant and non-participant observation, sampling methods, interviews, structured and unstructured questionnaires, transcription, and archival research. I had also gone through for audio and video recording as the resource persons relate the myths, rituals, customs, and tales, etc.

6. Difficulties faced during fieldwork

Research based on primary sources seems to be very difficult. It would have been better if the research had been conducted earlier, like thirty years back or more than that. Because old people are not found since many of them have passed away. And the priests are now commercial-minded; hence, they are not willing to perform any rituals and share information about myths, customs, and practices without payment. On the other hand, most of the Boroks have been converted to other religions. Therefore, it was quite difficult to collect data and gather information in time. Most of the resource persons being workers, they are hardly available at their homes. Therefore, I had to spend many nights at their home to collect sources from them.

7. Findings and Conclusion

Boroks are a very simple and welcoming tribe. They have their own traditional religious faith, which is polytheistic. They don't worship one deity, but several deities worshipped in different rituals. There are malevolent and benevolent deities invoked for different purposes. They propitiate the deities by offering rice beers in the rituals. Besides rice beer, they also sacrifice specific livestock to worship the deities for the betterment of the family members. Most of the rituals are performed by offering rice beers and sacrificing specific animals to their traditional deities. All rituals are performed orally without scripts. There are poetic chanting, songs, dances, and unique ritualistic behaviour patterns performed

orally while invoking the deities. All these folk beliefs and practices are rituals and require. On the other hand, with the passage of time, such beliefs and practices are waning due to education, commercialisation, and modernisation.

8. End notes:

i. **Borok:** In a wider sense, *Borok* means human beings, and in a narrow sense, it is those who speak the *Kokborok* language. And in this paper, the term is used to address only those Kokborok-speaking people who write '*Tripura*' as their surname.

ii. **Ochai:** Priest

iii. **Motai:** The term '*motai*' has multiple meanings. It is a kind of umbrella term that covers words like religion, religious practices, ritual, deity, god, and goddesses, and so on.

iv. **Kuchai:** A kind of leaf used for purification.

v. **Matris:** It is a term used to address some diseases that are found in a baby. It is believed by Boroks that there are 1600 types of *matris*. To prevent such *matris*, Boroks observe different types of rites and rituals. Some matrices are born with disabilities, speech disorders, excessive blinking, often yawning, drooling, frequent smiling, abnormal behaviours, abnormal parts of the body, and so on. Old people behaving in a strange manner is also believed to be an effect of *matrice*.

vi. **Tansrai:** Assistant priest

vii. **Romasrai:** Assistant priest

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