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ORAL TRADITIONS AND CULTURAL PRACTICES OF THE BOROK PEOPLE IN TRIPURA

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ABSTRACT

In every human community, oral traditions, customs, and practices serve as living repositories of collective memory, passed down from one generation to the next by word of mouth. The English term culture derives from the Latin colere, "to cultivate" or "to worship," and implies processes of refinement, adaptation, and transmission. Among the Borok people, however, there is no separate word for "culture" and "tradition." Instead, they use the phrase "tongmwng chamwng" – literally "way of living" or "way of consuming" – to encompass both the dynamic practices and inherited traditions that shape their daily lives. As modernization, Western influence, and proselytization have begun to erode many of these practices, there is an urgent need to document tongmwng chamwng before it is irrevocably altered or lost. This paper therefore seeks to explore and record the distinctive cultural rituals, ceremonies, and oral narratives of the Borok people, both to preserve them for future scholarship and to honor their continuing vitality.

KEYWORDS: *Traditions, Culture, Borok, Tongmwng Chamwng, Arts And Crafts.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Tripura is one of the eight states of northeast and home to nineteen 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 are divided into three groups: Tibetan- Burman group, 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) *Tripura*, (2) *Reang* (3) *Jamatia*, (4) *Noatia*, (5) *Uchoi*, (6) *Kalai*, (7) *Rupini*, (8) *Debbarma* and (9) *Murasing*. All these nine clans or sub-tribes are addressed as *"Borok*", "*Twiprasa*" and "*Tripuri*". Every indigenous tribe or community has its own terminology to define and describe its worldview, its beliefs in cosmology, spirituality or god. A native word can authentically and comprehensively conceptualise the cultural practices like no borrowed term can do. Therefore, it is useful to employ the native term "*tongmwng chamwng*" to describe the traditional and cultural practices of the Borok people.

The word *tongmwng chamwng* is a *kokborok* term found in *kokborok* literature and dictionary. The term *tongmwng chamwng* means "way of life" or "way of consuming". Indigenous faith systems are quite distinct in terms of norms, practices, philosophy, propitiations and are transmitted orally through myths, folk songs, rituals, taboos, riddles, and folktales etc. The indigenous people believe in souls and worship the mountains, hills, rivers, the sun, the moon, in order to propitiate the soul within all these natural objects. Edward Burnett Tylor calls this form of folk practice as animism, derived from the Latin word anima or animus which generally means a 'breath' or 'soul' or 'spirit'. Sacrifice in *Boroks society* is known as '*dali'* meaning "to behead". Dali has always been an integral part of *Borok tongkwthar* since ancient times. The term has different meanings and significance based on rituals. Dali in *Borok tongkwthar* is a rite in which an object or an animal is offered to a divinity in order to establish, maintain, or restore a right relationship of a human being to the sacred order. The equipment of sacrifice differs according to the deity worshipped. It is believed that through the ritual of sacrifice, the consecrated life of an offering is liberated as a sacred potency that establishes a bond between the householder and the sacred power. The important cultural practices are foods; drinks, occupations, house pattern, administrative system, folk beliefs, and etc. constitute the cultural identity of the Borok people.

2. Cultural Practices of the Borok People

2.1. *Kok* (Language)

The language spoken by the *Borok* people is known as *Tripura-kok* which is one of the nine dialects of *Kokborok* language. For example, the other dialects are known as *Jamatia-kok*, *Debbarma-kok*, *Reang-kok* and so on. Similarly, the sub-clans have also their own dialects referred to as *Phatong-Kok*, *Anok-Kok*, *Khaklu-Kok*, *Aswlong-Kok*, *Naitong-Kok* etc. All these dialects constitute the *Kokborok* language which is a Tibeto-Burman language. Kokborok means the language of human beings; kok means language and *Borok* means human beings. According to P.N. Battacharjee:

> The phonetic, morphemic and syntactic characters of all these nine *Kokborok* speaking sub-tribes' dialects have

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close affinity with each other. *Kokborok* is one of the branches of the Tibeto-Burman language. Most of the northeastern tribes namely the B*odos, Dimashas, Kochs, Karbis, Achiks, Garos* speak branches of the same Tibeto-Burman language. Therefore, there are many similarities in words of these tribes. (Bhattacharjee 20)

Kokborok doesn't have a script of its own. However, according to some from the community, once upon a time, they had also a script of their own. The script, known as "*Koloma*" was created by a scholar known as Rajratnakar. The script is believed to have developed in 1st century CE and used by the Royal Family of Tripura. The script fell out of use after 14th century, and is believed to have become extinct. The script used to be written on leaves of jackfruit. There is a story about the loss of the script among the Boroks. It is said that one day, a scholar while responding to nature's call, had left the manuscript leaves unprotected and open on the ground. A stray goat ate them up. Since then the Boroks don't have a script of their own. When *Kokborok* language was declared an official State language in 1979, Bengali and Roman scripts were used for writing and reading in offices, schools, colleges and Universities. Though in recent years, the Boroks are demanding that the Roman script be specified for Kokborok language.

2.2. ***Tripura Borokni Bosong*** **(Subdivisions of the *Tripura Boroks*)**

'Tripura' Boroks are further divided into twelve sub-divisions namely: i. *Phatong*, ii. *Anok*, iii. *Naitong*, iv. *Khaklu*, v. *Totaram*, vi. *Aslwong*, vii. *Kroatia*, viii. *Dendak*, ix. *Keowa*, x.*Garjan*, xi.*Tongbai*, and xii. *Kalicha*.

2.3. Tripura Borokni *Bosong Bedek* (Clans of the *Tripura Boroks*)

There are many clans within the subdivision of the Borok people. These clans can be grouped into two: male clans and female clans. Some of the male clans are *Kaibing*, *Bera*, *Kungdai*, *Hasungma*, *Bongbai*, *Kana*, *Khamsak*, *Harbang*, *Anok*, Ramasawanjui, Mermajang, Thaimang, Nakang, Dugorong, the female clans are *Bangyama*, *Totaling*, *Legijuk*, *Baro*, *Chorajunma*, *Kaliraima*, *Hachokjunma*, *Khaima*, *Ramjunma*, *Morokjungma*, *Keya jungma*, *Takhomjungma*. Clan relations play defining roles in funeral rites and rituals. For example, when a woman dies, it is seen that only those female clans who are from the same lineage abstain from taking meat, fish, dry fish and eggs and observe the rite of *kaha yarnai* (biting the bitter and dried fish). Similarly, when a male member dies, only the male members from the same lineage observe the taboos, rites, and rituals. Restrictions are observed till the last rite known as *kwthui mairinai* is performed 6 days after cremation. Such taboos and rites observed by the clan members are discussed in detail in the Fourth Chapter "Death Rituals of the Boroks".

2.6. *Kanmani* (Ornaments)

Borok girls and married women wear different types of ornaments usually made of silver rather than gold. In olden days these ornaments were available in markets. Some ornaments are worn by married women as mark of their marital status while some ornaments are worn by young girls to look beautiful. Here some ornaments I have come across are mentioned below:

i. *Chandrahaar:* A very popular and expensive ornament worn by girls on marriage occasions.
ii. *Bengki*: Ornament worn on the ankles by girls.
iii. *Rangtang*: Ornament worn around the neck by girls.
iv. *Swrang*: Ornament worn in the hair.
v. *Mathiya*: Ornamentworn on the arms by girls.
vi. *Ganthi*: Ornament worn on the arms by girls.
vii. *Bwkwng*: Ornament worn in the nose by girls.
viii. *Brindabanful*: Ornament worn around the neck by widows.
ix. *Wakhum*: Ornament worn on the nose by girls.
x. *Khasiamala*: Ornament worn around the neck by girls.

The Borok women, no longer wear the traditional ornaments regularly but for specific purposes. In place of traditional ornaments, Borok girls and married women today prefer gold, silver, glass and plastic ornaments.

4. DISCUSSION

Diversity in *Boroks* culture is huge and not easy to focus them all in written form as well as in oral form. Something can be only perceived through visualization. Animal sacrifice and its collected blood in a holy bamboo leaf container is an integral part that has been laid down to their lives for thousands of years. The beheading and the collected blood of the sacrificial animals are very significant since it works as omen in hailing one from sickness and unknown diseases. The *Ochai* or Shaman predicts the worshiper's fortune and prescribes specific rituals depending on the reasons and problems. In *Borok s*culture sacrificial rituals can rectify one's mistakes in the sense of deeds and provide medicine along with discipline life-style. The collected blood acts as an omen in the form of colour variation and features exposing the auspicious and inauspicious of the devotee. In any incarnation of a deity sacrificial blood is assumed as omen by the indigenous people. The tribes are provided with such medicines and a way of discipline lifestyle through this practice. Through this custom the communities get assembled together which turn into a great harmony. The *Borok* tribe is highly rich in its varied cultures, traditions and religions. In this small state peoples are living in great harmony. The *Boroks* have been worshipping the Mother Nature. Though a major portion of members of the tribe have converted into Christianity and other religions but their own religious beliefs and deities still exist in the society.

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