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Oral Traditions and a Their Significance in Preserving Cultural Identity: A Study of the Kokborok-Speaking Community of Tripura

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Abstract: *Oral tradition refers to a wide variety of verbal art forms such as folktales, folksongs, myths, proverbs, riddles, and idioms, curse phrasing, priest chanting etc. that are transmitted across generations through spoken word, serving as a vibrant expression of cultural heritage and a vital means of preserving the history, values, and identity of indigenous communities. Oral traditions play a significant role in preserving the cultural identity, history and collective memory of kokborok speaking community.This paper examines the oral traditions of kokborok speaking community of Tripura and explores the significance in maintaining cultural identity and heritage.*

Keywords: Oral Tradition; Kokborok; Community; Indigenous; Tripuri

I. INTRODUCTION

Definition of Oral Tradition

According to J. Vansina oral tradition is a dynamic process that evolves through generations, shaped by changing social and cultural experiences. It includes various forms such as prayers, poetry, epics, narratives, proverbs and sayings, which may be considered factual or fictional depending on a society's beliefs. Vansina also highlights that methods of preserving and transmitting oral traditions vary across generations.(Vansina J, 1985)

The UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, which came into effect on 20 April 2006, defines oral traditions as "expressions that transmit knowledge, values and the collective memory of a folk group". Oral traditions are passed on by word of mouth, which renders them particularly vibrant, but also fragile, as their survival depends on an uninterrupted chain of transmission." (Diwasa et al. 2007:4)

Kokborok Speaking Community

Kokborok literally translates to "people's language" and is associated with the Tipra (Tripuri) community. The term is derived from two words: kok meaning "speech or language," and borok meaning "people." There are no known written records of this term before 1900. It was first coined by Thakur Radhamohan Debbarma in his 1900 publication Kok-Borok-Ma.

Kokborok serves as the mother tongue of nine communities, whose speakers are collectively identified as the Tipra people. They are predominantly found in the northeastern state of India, while smaller populations are also found in Assam, Mizoram, and Bangladesh(neighbouring country of India), particularly in Dhaka and the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The language is divided into nine dialects: *Debbarma, Reang, Tripura, Jamatia, Noatia, Kalai, Murasing, Rupini,* and *Uchoi.*

As per the 2011 Census of India, around 880,357 individuals in Tripura reported Kokborok as their first language, representing 23.97% of the state's total population. The Tripura Legislative Assembly granted Kokborok the status of a state language on January 17, 1979, and this was formally recorded in the state gazette on January 19, 1979.

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Subsequently, on April 20, 1999, it was also recognized as the official language of the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC).(Debbarma B, 2015)

II. OBJECTIVES

- To analyse the various genres of oral traditions found in Kokborok Speaking community
- To examine the significance and role of oral traditions in preservingthe cultural identity of the Kokborok Speaking community.

III. MAJOR GENRES OF ORAL TRADITIONS OF KOKBOROK SPEAKING COMMUNITY

There are many types of oral traditions found in Kokborok speaking community, which are mentioned below:

Folktales

Kokborok folktales are known as "Kerang Kothoma," are traditional stories narrated by elders during, bedtime family gatherings and festivals. They portray the relationship between humans and nature through imaginative characters, transformations, and moral lessons. The Kokborok-speaking community possesses a rich and diverse collection of folktales that reflect its cultural heritage, traditional beliefs, and indigenous knowledge. Some notable examples include Juwangkha, Khumpui, Kwaikendraisa, Kherengbar, and The Legend of the White Elephant, among many others.

The Chethuwang folktale tells the story of a younger sister who escapes her elder brother's unacceptable marriage proposal by climbing a tall tree, which eventually carries her towards the heavens. The tale reflects the Kokborok-speaking community's cultural prohibition against marriage between siblings. Symbolically, the Chethuwang tree represents the sister's courage, purity, and resistance against injustice. The tale also highlights women's dignity and the importance of moral values within families and society. Furthermore, it explains thunder and lightning through indigenous beliefs, associating thunder with the brother's angry roar and lightning with the sudden appearance of the sister's fair-complexioned legs.

(Murasing C, 2015)

Folksongs

Folksongs are an important part of oral tradition and have been passed down from generation to generation, with most original composers now unknown. In Kokborok, afolk song is called "*Luku Rwchabmung*," and its tunes follow simple rhythms that reflect their cultural traditions.

The primary folk song of the Kokborok-speaking community is Jadu Kolija, also known as Jaduni. It is commonly sung during joyful occasions, moments of deep love, or while relaxing after a long day of work in the jhum fields, often in a playful exchange between a sister-in-law and brother-in-law. In addition to festive contexts, Jaduni is also performed during times of grief, especially to express sorrow and pain after the loss of a loved one. Other folk songs include Marriage folksong, Agricultural song, Prayer song, Waying Khilimung(lullaby) and Resiyar Khagra. (Debbarma M, 2025)

For example:

Kokborok	**English**
Bolong Tokfua tentayui pungo	*Tokfua*(bird) ischirping in anunbrokenrhythm
Bolongno mwchangwi pungo	Filling the woods with gentlebeauty
Bari khumtoya perwi si tangkha	Blooming *Khumtoya*(flower)
Bari nomwchangwi	Lights the garden with beauty
Nokhala buchwgo moso bilati	Wild chillie rise at the courtyard's edge,
Buphangno mwchangwi thayu	Wild chilli plants, heavy with fruits
Apha bo hati o thangu	Father has stepped out for the market
Ama bo haba o thangu	Mother is off to the work
Kholuisi nafaidi kisa.	Step forward and pluck the bloom.

(Trans: Mine)

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Proverbs

The Tripuri language, also known as *Kokborok*, is renowned for its clever wordplay and rich collection of witty expressions and proverbs, referred to as *Kok Khitarma*. An example of kokborok proverb is given below:

Proverb: Bera kwbai nuk khe puma sak swnaro

Meaning: The powerful frequently exploit those who are weak and vulnerable to serve their own interests and personal gains.

Kok-phemlokma (Riddles)

Kok phemlokma, orTripuri riddles, are an integral part of tipra culture and language. Riddles have been a universal form of intellectual play and creative expression across cultures.

For instance:

Twiyo achaibo twiyo tongya

Twi nangkha bo darogwi manya = Som

Idioms:Kokborok language has a treasure trove of idioms that add flavour and cultural depth to communication.The richness of Tripuri idioms is a testament to the language's vitality and the creativity of its speakers.

Example: "Bo Ani mokolni fann" implies “He/she is my enemy”.

Kokborok Rhymes

Kokborok	English
"*Athukiri thui-thai,*	Twinkle twinkle little star
Moso bari dum-jak,	the chilli garden adorned with a beautiful fence,
Rajani bwsa rajkumari,	the king’s daughter,
Rignai kanwibo yalw-lwk,	wearing rignai, she looks beautiful,
Risa sorwibo yalw-lwk,	wearing risa, she looks amazing,

(Trans: Mine)

IV. SIGNIFICANCE OF ORAL TRADITION IN PRESERVING CULTURAL IDENTITY

The following are the significance of oral traditions in preserving cultural identity

Preservation of cultural identity

Oral traditions play a vital role in preserving cultural identity by passing down knowledge, beliefs, and customs from one generation to the next through storytelling, songs, chants, and proverbs. They act as a means of transmitting history and collective memory, helping people understand their roots and ancestral heritage. Through folktales and narratives, moral values, social norms, acceptable behaviours are taught within the community.

Transmission of knowledge

Oral tradition plays an important role in the transmission of knowledge by passing information from elders to younger generations through stories, songs, proverbs, and chants. It helps preserve history, cultural practices, moral values, and indigenous skills such as farming and medicine. It also supports learning in an easy and memorable way, ensuring that important knowledge is continuously shared and maintained within the community.

Language preservation

Oral tradition plays significant role in preserving the Kokborok language by keeping it alive through regular use in stories, songs, proverbs, and everyday communication. It allows the language to be passed from elders to younger generations without written records. Through these oral forms, traditional words, expressions, and pronunciation are preserved and protected from being lost.

Moral and social education

Oral tradition plays vital role in teaching moral and social education by using stories, folktales, myths, and proverbs to pass on values and life lessons. It helps individuals learn about honesty, respect, discipline, and responsibility in an

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interesting and easy-to-understand way. It strengthens ethical thinking and guides individuals to live harmoniously within society while respecting traditions and relationships.

Connection to history and ancestry

Oral traditions play a significant role in connecting people to their history and ancestry by preserving stories of origins, migration, heroes, and important past events. These narratives, passed down from elders, help the community understand where they come from and how their ancestors lived.

Adaptability and continuity

Oral tradition plays an important role in ensuring both adaptability and continuity of culture. It allows stories, songs, and knowledge to be slightly modified over time to reflect changing social conditions while still preserving the core cultural values. This flexibility helps traditions remain relevant to each generation.

Protection against cultural erosion

Oral traditions play an important role in protecting against cultural erosion by keeping indigenous knowledge, language, and customs alive through continuous use in daily life. Stories, songs, proverbs, and rituals help preserve traditional beliefs and prevent them from being replaced by external cultural influences. By passing this knowledge from elders to younger generations, oral traditions strengthen cultural identity and awareness.

V. CONCLUSION

Oral traditions are an essential for preserving the cultural identity, history, and heritage of the kokborok speaking community of Tripura. Through folktales, folksongs, proverbs, idioms and other forms of oral tradition, the community transmits its knowledge, beliefs, customs and values from one generation to another. However, modernisation poses challenges to their continuity. Therefore, proper documentation and intergenerational transmission are necessary to safeguard this valuable cultural heritage for future generations.

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