

The Dynamics of 'Borokni Elem': Redefining Folklore from Oral Tradition to Collective Knowledge

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Abstract

This study explores the fundamental meaning and evolving scope of folklore, starting with its etymological roots, where 'folk' represents the people (Borok) and 'lore' signifies their collective knowledge (Elem). Historically, folklore was defined as the traditional wisdom preserved and transmitted through generations via oral traditions (Khukbai Khugo Sajagwi). However, as this study argues, the boundaries of folklore have expanded significantly. Drawing on the perspectives of scholar Mojoharul Islam, the research examines how folklore now encompasses a vast spectrum: from the past to the future, from rural villages (Kami) to urban centers (Aguli), and from the uneducated to the educated sections of society. However, the term 'Folk' was once confined to the laboring or farming classes (Hukbar Khwlainai). It is now understood to refer to any group of two or more individuals who share a common body of knowledge that is transmitted through practice or speech. This study analyzes the transition from oral culture to written documentation (Swijak Hukumu) and emphasizes that folklore is not merely a static relic of the past. Instead, it is a dynamic and evolving entity that continues to influence social identity and cultural heritage.

Key words: Folklore, Borokni Elem, Oral tradition (Khukbai Khugo), Mojoharul Islam, Cultural heritage, Tiprasa identity

Before understanding what folklore is, one must first understand its literal meaning. The meaning of folklore is derived from 'folk,' meaning 'people' (Borok), and 'lore,' meaning 'knowledge' (Elem) [1]. Folklore refers to the knowledge of people that has been preserved since ancient times and passed down from generation to generation through word of mouth or oral tradition. Folklore has gradually expanded over time. Today, it is said that no single person can define or explain folklore with absolute clarity [2]. However, folklore was not recognized as a distinct subject by society. Furthermore, it cannot be said that folklore is created only by the educated or the uneducated, nor is it strictly an oral culture.

Mojaharul Islam, an expert on folklore, stated

The scope of folklore has now expanded greatly, it includes the past, the present, and the future; from the village to the city; from the educated to the uneducated society; and from oral traditions to written culture. Beyond this, in the past, the term 'folk' was used only to refer to those who worked in the fields or lived as farmers [3]. However, the modern meaning of 'folk' has changed. Today, 'folk' refers to a group of two or more people who share a common body of knowledge that has been preserved and passed down through oral traditions and storytelling [4].

The history of folklore

William John Thoms was the first to coin the term "Folklore," which was published in the journal *The Athenaeum* in 1846. Between 1803 and 1885, the word was created by combining the English word 'Lore' (meaning instruction or knowledge) with 'Folk', derived from the German word 'Volk' (meaning people). In ancient times, Folklore was also known as "Popular Antiquities," a term referring to ancient traditions and culture [5].

Beyond its original name, "Folklore" is recognized by various terms in different regions and languages around the world.

These are shown below:

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|---------|---|---|
| German | : | Volkskunde |
| Italian | : | Demologia |
| Greek | : | Demos |
| French | : | Demologie |
| Spain | : | Demologia (Demosofia) |
| Sweden | : | Folkminne (Folk minue) |
| Russia | : | Naroduyya |
| India | : | Loke Sanskriti, Loke krite, Loke Lore, Loko Yana, Loke Charya |

The primary objective of the present study is to examine Borokni Elem folklore as a dynamic system of cultural knowledge, tracing its transmission from oral traditions to collectively shared and sustained forms within the Tiprasa

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(Tripuri) community. The study seeks to document, analyze, and interpret the processes through which folklore is preserved, practiced, and internalized across generations, thereby contributing to the understanding of folklore as a living repository of social values, cultural identity, and indigenous knowledge.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present study employs a qualitative, descriptive, and ethnographic methodology to examine Borokni Elem folklore as a living system of collective knowledge transmitted primarily through oral tradition among the Tiprasa (Tripuri) community of Tripura. Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources, with primary information gathered through oral interviews, participant observation, narrative documentation, and material culture surveys involving elders, storytellers, artisans, ritual specialists, and performers who function as custodians of traditional knowledge. Secondary sources, including classical and contemporary folkloristic literature, provided theoretical grounding and historical context. The collected data were systematically classified and analyzed using Richard M. Dorson's fourfold framework Oral Literature, Social Folk Customs, Performing Folk Arts, and Material Culture to ensure structural coherence and scholarly rigor. Special attention was given to documenting folklore in the Kokborok language, with contextual translation methods adopted to preserve indigenous meanings, symbolism, and cultural nuance. Ethical research practices were strictly followed, emphasizing informed consent, respect for sacred traditions, and accurate representation of community knowledge. This integrated methodological approach enabled a holistic understanding of how Borokni Elem folklore functions not merely as inherited tradition but as a dynamic cultural force shaping identity, spirituality, and everyday life within the Tiprasa society.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Categories of folklore

Richard M. Dorson was a prominent American folklorist. He is often called the Father of American Folklore. According to him, folk culture, songs, stories, festivals, and lifestyle, all of these are included within the scope of folklore study.

Based on Dorson's perspective, Folklore is classified into four main categories, as shown below:

Oral literature: This includes spoken or sung traditions such as myths, legends, proverbs, and folksongs.

Social folk customs: These refer to traditional social practices, including rituals, festivals, and community celebrations.

Performing folk arts: This category covers traditional performances such as folk dance, music, and theatre.

Material culture: This involves the physical artifacts of a culture, such as traditional crafts, architecture, and folk art.

Oral literature

Oral Literature refers to traditions that are preserved and passed down solely through word of mouth. Since the beginning of creation, these have been transmitted verbally from one generation to the next [6]. Examples include traditional stories,

proverbs, ritual songs (Jaduni), riddles, lullabies (Waying khilimung), incantations (Suraimung), and various folk sayings.

Its branches include

- a. *Folk narrative:* Traditional stories and legends (Kerang kothoma).
- b. *Narrative folk poetry:* Folk poems that tell a story (Luku wanswkmung koklop).
- c. *Folk epic:* Grand, heroic folk tales (Luku kothomayung).
- d. *Proverbs and proverbial expressions:* Traditional wise sayings (Kokbokhiri).
- e. *Riddles:* Puzzles or metaphorical questions (Phunukmung).
- f. *Folk speech:* Local dialects and traditional ways of speaking (Luku kok samung).

Social folk customs

These are the traditions and rules established by our community. No one can say for certain who created them or exactly when they began. People of the same community continue to follow these traditions collectively. These customs, which are deeply rooted in the community's way of life and religious practices, include:

- i. *Traditional celebrations:* Festivals and customs passed down through generations.
- ii. *Occupational customs:* Traditions related to work, such as specific rituals for farming, hunting, or gathering food.
- iii. *Life-cycle rituals:* Customs surrounding birth (such as Abul Suprima or naming ceremonies) and funeral rites (Teratori) performed after death. All these fall under Social Folk Customs.
- iv. *Harvest and food rituals:* Traditions involving the collection of forest produce or the ritual consumption of the first harvest.
- v. *Folk festivals:* The various community-wide festivals and local celebrations (Luku tongthar).

Performing folk arts

This category refers to arts performed using physical talent and skill, or those showcased before an audience; these are called Performing Folk Arts. All forms of folk music, dance, and traditional theatre are included in this branch. Among our community, examples include the Tangbiti, Mamita, Gorja, and Lebang dances. Our traditional musical instruments include the Sumui (flute), Dangdu (mouth harp), Sarinda, and Chongpreng.

Material culture

Material culture refers to the expression of an individual's craftsmanship and skills. It includes the physical objects we have seen, touched, and held since the beginning of time. This category covers everything from the tools we use for work to our traditional attire, such as the designs on Rignai and Rikutu, and our methods of cooking and food preparation [7].

Specifically, it includes traditional bamboo and wood crafts such as:

- Takhuk (Cotton ginning tool)
- Chatai (Floor mat)
- Langa (Traditional basket)
- Baling (Winnowing fan/sieve)

Branches of material culture

Material Culture can be categorized into different branches based on the various types of physical work and objects created by the people:

- (i) *Folk art:* Traditional creative expressions and designs (Luku Rwbai).

- (ii) *Folk craft*: Handcrafted items made from bamboo, wood, or textiles (Luku wamung).
- (iii) *Folk dress and ornamentation*: Traditional clothing and ways of dressing (Luku kanmung-chumung).
- (iv) *Folk architecture*: Traditional methods of building houses and structures (Luku tangmung).
- (v) *Folk medicine*: Traditional healing practices and herbal remedies (Luku bithi).
- (vi) *Folk cookery*: Traditional methods of preparing and cooking food (Luku songmung).

Folk art (Luku Rwbai)

Folk art is the artistic expression of a people. Looking back at history, it is defined as the act of making things beautiful or decorating them. Today, we can ask: what do we beautify and how? We decorate our homes, our clothing, our bodies, and even the objects we use in our daily lives. On special occasions, houses are made beautiful with different colors according to the traditions of various communities [8].

In other communities, house decoration is very prominent; during festivals like Diwali and Hangrai (Poush Sankranti), many different types of colorful decorations are seen. Traditional floor art, or Alpana, is also essential for beautifying the home. In many parts of the world, people decorate their courtyard walls with white paint according to their own culture. However, among the Tiprasa (Tripuri) people, this specific type of wall decoration is not as common.

Similarly, clothing is made beautiful using various colors. In the past, before artificial dyes existed, colors were made from nature using leaves, tree bark, and fruits according to folk traditions [9]. Threads dyed with these natural colors were then woven into beautiful patterns and floral designs (Mokol thairinai bwthai).

However, while Folk Art is about beauty, if we look closely at Tiprasa art, it is deeply connected to the divine and the creation of deities. For example, during the Wathop ritual, bamboo is finely sliced with a da (traditional blade) to create intricate patterns that represent a message to the gods. Additionally, once a year, the Rondok (sacred pot) is worshipped, and its neck is decorated with red color to represent the image of a deity.

Folk craft (Luku Wamung)

Folk craft refers to items crafted from bamboo, cane, and wood. These objects are used in the daily activities of a household. Examples include the Siching (sieve), Baling (winnowing fan), Yakhung (carrying basket), and Langa (storage basket). One can say that folk crafts were born out of the necessity to carry out daily chores. These skills are not learned in a single day; rather, they represent years of tradition embedded in the methods of gathering and shaping materials. The techniques of one community remain distinct and are preserved over many years, passed down from father to son and from grandfather to father. From the time people lived in forests, they incorporated materials found in their surroundings into their daily lives. Different types of tools and objects are required depending on a person's lifestyle and traditions [10].

In the state of Tripura, forests and bamboo groves are abundant. Therefore, most items are crafted using bamboo, cane, and wood. From the Yakhung used while sitting on the ground to the Siching used for carrying water, these are essential for daily survival. Even today, these bamboo crafts can still be found in village households, though they are becoming increasingly rare in urban homes. To put it simply, from the start of morning chores until the end of the day at night, life is intricately connected to these folk crafts.

Folk dress and ornamentation (Luku kanmung-chumung)

Among all human needs, the most essential for survival on earth are food, shelter, and clothing. Clothing was originally created to protect the body from heat, cold, and to maintain modesty. It was also developed as a way to adorn and beautify oneself, becoming a vital part of the struggle for existence. In the earliest times, when living in forests, people used tree bark and leaves to shield themselves from the wind and rain; later, animal skins were used to ward off the biting cold. Eventually, they discovered how to spin thread from cotton, leading to the creation of woven garments [11]. Today, in the modern era, a vast variety of colorful clothing is easily available.

Clothing is considered the identity of a community. The traditional dress of one group differs significantly from another, often designed based on their environment. For instance, those in cold climates wear thick, heavy garments, while those in warmer regions wear light, breathable clothing. Beyond daily wear, clothing also changes according to traditions and specific occasions, there are distinct styles for weddings, festivals, and even funeral rites.

Folk architecture (Luku tangmung)

If we look at human history, it is said that people originally lived in forests and caves. As time passed, they began building shelters using tree leaves to protect themselves from the sun and rain, marking the beginning of architecture. Gradually, as their knowledge and thinking evolved, they started constructing houses to establish families. After building houses, they created granaries to store food and raised fences or enclosures to protect themselves and their livestock from wild animals.

Architecture varies depending on a community's lifestyle and environment. Homes and courtyards are built using the materials available in their specific surroundings. This unique style of construction, passed down through a community since the beginning of their history, is known as Folk Architecture.

Folk medicine (Luku bithi)

The art of preparing traditional medicine was not learned in a short time. Through ages of observation, trial, and research, people discovered how to create the necessary remedies. Today, when we fall ill, we can easily consult a doctor and take prescribed medicine. We have access to various effective and pleasant-tasting medicines for our daily health, and doctors are available to treat our illnesses [12].

However, in ancient times, when modern clinics did not exist, people relied on handmade remedies. They used materials found in the forest, such as tree bark, leaves, roots, and even animal bile, skin, blood, or bones, to prepare medicines that could cure diseases. These treatments were highly effective in providing relief from various ailments. Traditional medicine prepared according to the specific customs and indigenous knowledge of a community is called Folk Medicine. Even today, people living in rural and remote areas continue to prepare and use these traditional remedies for healing.

Folk cookery (Luku songmung)

Food is the most vital necessity for human survival. Without it, life cannot be sustained. In the earliest times, before the discovery of fire, people ate their food raw just to stay alive. Once fire was discovered, they began to roast or cook their food. Initially, they roasted items directly over the fire, and later, after the invention of pottery, they learned to boil and cook in earthen vessels. Today, while we use various modern utensils, our ancestors first used items made from the earth.

From eating raw food, we have evolved through time to master various techniques boiling, frying, steaming, and roasting, creating a vast array of dishes. Every community and tribe have its own unique culinary traditions. These methods are influenced by the environment, available ingredients, festivals, and social customs. Folk Cookery refers to the traditional food and drink prepared according to these specific cultural rules. Among the Borok people, distinct dishes are prepared for occasions such as births, deaths, and sacred festivals. These recipes and food habits are not written down but are learned by observing and following the practices passed down by elders over generations [13].

Folk narrative / Oral literature (Luku Kokrwbai)

Folk narrative includes traditional tales (Kerang kothoma), riddles (Phumulokmung), proverbs (Koktang), and community traditions. These stories preserve faith, customs, and lifestyles, offering lessons and keeping the names of various animals and birds alive in our memory. To understand the preservation of these traditional beliefs, one can look at the Tiprasa folk tale of 'Raima and Sorma'.

Another example is the story of two sisters who, while working in the Huk (shifting cultivation field), mistakenly cooked a snake (Chibuk muiselena) thinking it was a species of fish (Sai). Similarly, the tale of 'Kherengbar' teaches us about destiny and the laws of the world. Such folk tales exist in almost every community.

Additionally, riddles and proverbs keep ancient vocabulary and wisdom alive. Examples of such folk sayings and riddles include:

"Swi khitungda wasungo dawu peng" (Like a dog's tail inside a bamboo tube, referring to something that never straightens/changes).

"Ochainei nogo bema kakya" (Sickness does not enter the priest's house).

"Jamida munwi twi" (Water from a cracked earthen pot).

"Hangarda suwi phur" (Washing charcoal to make it white, referring to a hopeless task).

- *Etymological roots:* Folklore, originally termed "Popular Antiquities," was redefined in 1846 by William John Thoms to represent the collective knowledge ("Lore") of the people ("Folk").
- *Structural framework:* Following Richard M. Dorson's classification, folklore is divided into four pillars: Oral Literature, Social Customs, Performing Arts, and Material Culture.

- *Cultural identity:* For the Tiprasa community, material culture is synonymous with environmental adaptation, utilizing bamboo, cane, and natural dyes to create essential tools like the Langa and the iconic Rignai textiles.
- *Ritualistic art:* Unlike purely aesthetic art, Tiprasa Folk Art is deeply spiritual, seen in ritualistic objects like the Wathop and the decorated Rondok pot used in deity worship.
- *Oral preservation:* Oral traditions, including tales like Raima-Sorma and proverbs (Koktang), serve as a living archive that preserves the ancient Kokborok language and tribal ethics.

CONCLUSION

The study of Folklore explores an essential lens through which the identity, history, and spiritual depth of the Tiprasa (Tripuri) community can be understood. From its academic inception by William John Thoms to the structured frameworks of Richard M. Dorson, folklore is revealed not as a static relic of the past, but as a living, breathing continuity of human experience. The four parts, Oral Literature, Social Folk Customs, Performing Folk Arts, and Material Culture, form a holistic ecosystem of tribal life. Oral traditions, such as the legends of Raima and Sorma and the wisdom of Kokborok proverbs, act as a linguistic bridge, preserving the community's ethical values and ancestral memories without the need for written scripts. Simultaneously, Social Customs and Performing Arts, characterized by rhythmic dances like the Gorias and the soul-stirring melodies of the Sumui, reinforce social cohesion and religious devotion. However, the Material Culture of the Tripuri people show a remarkable harmony with nature. The mastery of bamboo and cane crafts, such as the Langa and Yakhung, along with the intricate weaving of the Rignai, demonstrates a sophisticated blend of utility and aesthetic pride. These crafts are more than mere objects; they are symbols of resilience and environmental stewardship. Folk Art in this context transcends decoration, finding its highest expression in sacred rituals like the Wathop, where physical craftsmanship becomes a medium for divine communication. However, folklore serves as the ultimate "sinimung" or identity of the people. In an era of rapid globalization, documenting and valuing these traditional systems is crucial. It ensures that the unique cultural heritage of the Tiprasa, built on centuries of observation, adaptation, and creativity, remains a source of pride and knowledge for future generations.

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