

Ecological and Social Symbolism of the Egg in the Bodo and Karbi Folk Narratives

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Abstract

The folk narratives of Northeast India embody deep ecological symbolism and reveal a deep connection between human society and their surrounding environment. Within this rich mythological landscape, the Bodo and Karbi folk traditions hold the egg as a central symbol of creation, fertility, purity, harmony, and balance. This study explores how the motif of the egg functions as both an ecological metaphor and a social construct, reflecting communities' understanding of life, nature, and coexistence. The research adopts a qualitative and comparative methodology, combining textual analysis of selected oral narratives, particularly the Bodo creation myth entitled Boro Kachari jwnwm janayni solo (The origin of Bodo Kachari) and the Karbi epic narrative Mosera, which literally means 'recalling the past', with interpretive eco-critical and symbolic approaches. It aims to cover how ecological symbols also embody social values such as harmony, purity, fertility, balance, and communal cooperation. Primary data are drawn from oral narratives and published folk collections, while secondary materials include scholarly works on mythology, ecology, and cultural studies.

Keywords: Bodos, Ecological symbolism, Egg, Folk Narrative, Karbis, Social symbolism, Myth.

INTRODUCTION

Folk narratives serve as mirrors of a community's worldview, reflecting not only beliefs about origins but also insights into human-environment interactions. The Bodo and Karbi peoples of North East India, through their rich oral traditions, offer stories that reveal an eco-centric understanding of the world. The egg occupies a central position in both Bodo and Karbi folk narratives. It is the source of life, the womb of potential, and a symbol of continuity and connectedness. It embodies creation, fertility, and environmental continuity, linking cosmology with local ecological knowledge.

A comparative analysis underscores the diversity of ecological imagination within Northeast Indian indigenous cultures. In the Bodo creation myth, Boro Kachari jwnwm janayni solo, divine birds lay three eggs from which all forms of life, including humans, emerge. In the Karbi Mosera, the mythical bird Vo-eplakpi lays eggs beneath trees and beside stones, from which the first Karbis and other tribes emerge. Both narratives suggest a worldview where humans, animals, plants, and natural formations share an intimate bond.

Research Objectives

The specific research objectives include-

- (i) Identifying the ecological motifs associated with the egg in both traditions.

- (ii) Examining their social and moral implications, and
- (iii) Interpreting how these symbols inform indigenous ecological ethics and cultural identity.

Discussion

The symbolism of the egg also extends into the ecological consciousness of the Bodos. Their worldview closely links human life with the rhythms of nature, and the egg serves as a symbol of this deep ecological connection. This theme is notably present in a Bodo creation myth entitled Boro Kachari jwnwm janayni solo, which center on the formation of the earth from an egg and presents a detailed cosmogony with moral and ecological dimensions. According to the creation myth, the world and all living beings were created by the supreme god Aham Guru. The God first creates two birds, a male and a female (Parkhi-Pakhini), and the female lays three eggs. A heavenly voice declares that three types of life will emerge after a long period. The female bird sits on the eggs for thousands of years, but no life appears. Out of curiosity, she breaks the first egg. Immediately, a heavenly voice warned her not to break the remaining two eggs, as doing so would destroy the universe. She was told to scatter the broken pieces of the first egg, and when she did so, ghosts, evil spirits, insects, trees, and plants came into being. These new creatures wandered restlessly, having no place to live and nothing to eat, since the earth did not yet exist.

Seeing this, Aham Guru decided to create the Earth. He commanded the birds and other small creatures to bring soil from the nether world, but none succeeded because the soil was guarded by the king of that realm. Finally, the Aham Guru sent two old fish, Magur and Maguri, who managed to gather some soil but were caught and punished by the guards. On their return journey, they died. The crow later found their bodies and informed Aham Guru, who decided to revive them for their bravery. He sent the mongoose to bring the death stick and life stick from heaven, the common myna to bring the fans of sorrow and peace, and the parrot to fetch leaves from the sacred Lairanglai¹ plant. After striking the dead fish with the sticks, Magur and Maguri came back to life. They suggested that Aham Guru use the small amount of soil that remained stuck to their beards to create the earth. From that tiny bit of soil, Aham Guru shaped the world. Because the amount was small, the Bodo-Kocharis believe that water covers more area than land on earth. To test the new land, Aham Guru sent a Dao Thifling² to check its hardness. When the bird reported that the soil was still soft, Aham Guru levelled it. The raised areas became hills, while the lower parts became plains, rivers, and ditches. Thus, the physical landscape of the world took form. Later, after a long period, humans were born from the two remaining eggs Man-Sin-Sin Borai³ and Man-Sin-Sin-Buroi⁴, and Diba Borai⁵ and Diba Buroi⁶. The first pair became ancestors of humankind, and their descendants are believed to be the Bodo-Kochari people, children of Aham Guru's divine creation.

From an ecological perspective, the story of creation myth reflects that the egg embodies the origin of life and the cyclical process of birth, death, and regeneration. Its rounded shape mirrors the natural cycles observed in the environment: the rotation of the earth, the change of seasons, and the continuity of life. The egg's form thus becomes a metaphor for the balance and interdependence that exist within nature. It hints that the egg acts as a symbolic bridge between human life and natural existence. Through rituals

¹ *Lairanglai*: a kind of medicinal plant found in Assam.

² *Dao Thifling*: a kind of small bird.

³ *Man-Sin-Sin-Borai*: first man created by the supreme deity *Bathou Borai* (Supreme God of the Bodos).

⁴ *Man-Sin-Sin-Buroi*: first man created by the supreme deity *Bathou Buroi*.

⁵ *Diba Borai*: one of the chief God of the wealth of the Bodos, also known as *Mainao Borai*.

⁶ *Diba Buroi*: one of the chief Goddess of the wealth of the Bodos, also known as *Mainao Buroi*.

involving eggs, the Bodos express their gratitude to the ecological elements, earth, water, plants, and animals that sustain human life. When an egg is offered together with other natural materials, it signifies the unity of all living and non-living forms in the cosmic cycle. In this sense, the egg represents the oneness of life and the mutual relationship between human beings and nature.

Moreover, the egg also has strong agricultural symbolism. It represents the fertility of the earth and the potential for abundance in crops, livestock, and human life. The Bodos' basic occupation is paddy cultivation. They considered Mainao as the "Guardian of the rice fields" or "the protectors of the paddy fields". There is a belief in Bodo society that in sowing or planting and the first harvesting period, if they offer eggs to the deity, then it will protect the land, good rainfall, fertile soil, a healthy harvest, and increase the production of rice. They worship her during the Asu⁷ and Sali⁸ crops. So, they believe in two goddesses Asu Mainao and Sali Mainao as the forms of Lakshmi. Being the consort of the Bathou Borai or Sibrai, she is also called Bathou Buroi or sometimes as Maothansri, Song Buroi, etc. She is the protectors of the household, also, family wealth and paddy in the field; hence her name is Mainao, for 'mai' means paddy and 'nao' means 'to keep, to watch over'. It is equivalent to Hindu goddess Lakshmi. During Mainao worship, when eggs are offered alongside some other natural elements, they represent the community's recognition that human life is inseparable from the natural world. The offering of eggs in such rituals symbolizes harmony between people and their ecological surroundings.

In Bodo society, egg is an integral element of social and religious customs. It is a representation of life, purity and social harmony and can be seen in many traditional rituals ranging from birth to oath taking. And the egg symbolizes life's beginning and continuation. In a number of social and religious settings, the egg is presented as a prayer for abundant life-fertility, growth, prosperity. At some of the marriage ceremonies, there are those that place eggs on the altar or at home before a deity or deities, in order to obtain favour from them for the pair who will naturally desire to be fruitful and lead a comfortable life. So, the egg is a social symbol of life's continuity and family well-being. The egg is a medium for to absorb negativity and impurities in Bodo healing and purification techniques. The Bodo traditional healer (Oja) may move an egg around a sick person's body and later discard it in a sacred place, symbolically transferring the illness or misfortune away from the person. This ritual act reflects the community's belief in the protective and purifying power of the egg.

Apart from religious symbolism, the egg embodies a social meaning in preserving the ancient custom among people. On the festival of Bwisagu⁹ the tradition of Daudwi maginai¹⁰ among the Bodos is yet another masterpiece tradition of the society. The practice also embodies the symbolic concept of social cohesion and harmony.

Similarly, the Karbi Mosera is a traditional epic narrative of the Karbi's origin and historical migration. One such probably the thī-kārhi or funerary rites as well as the risō chōjun (the collective youth celebration); I process, whereas in fact Mosēra versés are soberly intoned one after another in unbroken breathless cadence. The recitations serve as oral records, recording the group's journey from their homeland to various settlements and the trials that forged them as a people. Here is a brief introduction of Mosera-

Mythological bird The Vo-eplakpi, a mythological bird, lays eggs at the foot of the Teji-Temur and behind

⁷ *Asu*: a kind of paddy crop of the dry season.

⁸ *Sali*: a paddy genus mainly cultivated in rainy season.

⁹ Bwisagu: the largest seasonal festival of the Bodos

¹⁰ Daudwi maginai: tradition of collecting eggs during Bwisagu

rocks and cliffs. First Karbis, among other tribes, such as Ahoms, Khasis and Nagas hatched from these eggs. Creation by means of an egg Like Mosera or Karmetsa, some Karbi cultural beliefs also carry that the world was created through an egg. It is also found in other oral literature, like the Sabin Alun (Karbi Ramayana Geet) where the divine consort of Rama, Sitadevi, is mentioned to have been born from an egg. According to Mondal Sing Bey- “In this folk song ‘Mosera kehir’ found the glimpse of the philosophy of the origin of the Karbi tribe. According to this folk song the Karbi tribe was the offspring of the bat like bird. The bird had twelve eggs and from the first egg of the bird came out the fore- father of Karbi tribe and evolutionally other tribes namely Naga tribe, Ahom and then Tiwa tribes came into being. It was certain that this earth was predominant of evil spirit. However, the population of the Karbi had increased enormously.”¹¹

Migration constitutes a crucial motif within the Mosera. The Karbis’ journey from Longle Achete the “navel of the earth” across white skies, snowy mountains, and canyons is both a physical and spiritual odyssey. These images reflect not only geographical displacement but also the tribe’s moral and ecological struggle for survival. The hardships endured during migration symbolize the effort to maintain harmony with nature. The narrative teaches that endurance and growth are possible only through adaptation to environmental conditions and cooperation with other beings. Furthermore, the egg in this tale is not merely a container of life but a symbol of unity and shared existence. By being placed under trees and among stones, the egg emphasizes humans’ connection with the landscape. Trees symbolize growth and renewal, while stones represent stability and endurance. The myth situates humans within a landscape they belong to, rather than imposing them upon it.

Ecologically, the Mosera conveys an eco-centric vision. Humans are not above nature but coexist with other elements. The egg symbolizes collective potential the origin of humans and other living beings and stresses that all life is interdependent. Stones, cliffs, and trees are not merely backgrounds; these are active participants in creation, offering protection, nourishment, and stability.

Beyond ecological context, in the Karbi society, the egg also plays a very important role during the purification rituals that take place after the death of a family member. When someone in the household passes away, it is believed that the home becomes spiritually impure or out of balance. To restore peace and purity, the family performs a ritual of cleansing or purification, and during this process, the egg becomes a key element. In this way, 51 eggs are used as sacred offerings. “When a person is killed by fire, guns or bows, drowns in water, commits suicide, has an accident, 20 suffers from a maternity case, etc. then such death is considered as unnatural death. In such cases, no one is allowed to touch or go near the dead body other than the family member and until and unless the purification process is done. The purification process known as ‘Kecham’ must be conducted by a priest known as ‘Kakre-pancha’ or simply ‘Kakre’. He then by cutting an egg purifies the dead body and after that, the body is cremated.”¹²

Moreover, egg plays an essential part in the traditional healing practice of the Karbi society. Visiting a Kabiraj (traditional healer) during illness or times of misfortune has been an age-old custom deeply rooted in their cultural life. The Kabiraj plays an important role not only as a healer but also as a spiritual guide who connects human health with the forces of nature. When a person falls sick or when something unfortunate happens at home, the family usually calls the Kabiraj to examine the cause. What’s unique about this practice is that as a sacred and diagnostic tool, the Kabiraj often employs an egg. In the

¹¹ Bey, Mondol Sing. The Karbi Belief. Karbi Lammet Anei, Diphu, 2009, p. 55.

¹² <http://krepublishers.com/02-Journals/T-Anth/Anth-40-0-000-20-Web/Anth-40-1-3-000-20-Abst-PDF/T-Anth-40-1-3-016-20-2054-B-S/T-Anth-40-1-3-016-20-2054-B-S-Tx.pdf>

treatment ritual, the Kabiraj closely examines the patient and then does some rituals with egg. The egg is believed to uncover the root cause of an illness, cross condition or streak of bad luck - whether it be evil spirits, negative energy, a hex, or disruption to one's social and natural order. Often, the egg is broken or dropped into water after the ritual. Besides, in the Karbi society, there is an ancient and meaningful tradition related to childbirth. When a woman is about to give birth, her family performs a special ritual using an egg to pray for the safety and good health of both the mother and the child. Before the delivery, the family, along with the village priest or elders, goes to the nearby forest to worship nature and the spirits that protect life. An egg is offered during this worship as a sacred symbol of life, purity, and protection. "When a child is born in a family, it is necessary to propitiate Hemphu (Su preme Karbi deity), and such propitiation to Hemphu is called Vur-kamatha. But before this, another ritual called Voti Kepan (lit. cutting an egg) is performed on the onset of the delivery of a child. The ritual is done to drive away evil spirits from the boundary of the house and also to get rid of any probable mishap that jeopardises safe delivery. No earthen altar is prepared for this ritual, and the material required for the ritual is a banana leaf, bamboo branch, egg and rice. The ritual is performed by cutting off an egg."¹³

The egg also features prominently in collective ceremonies such as Rangkher Puja, one of the most important traditional rituals of the Karbi community. During this ritual, people offer eggs to the Langhe (stream or lake) as a mark of deep respect and gratitude. The Langhe is considered sacred because it provides water, which is the source of life and sustenance for all living beings. Similarly, there is a traditional practice of eating newly harvested rice for the first time each year, which is considered a moment of joy and gratitude towards nature. However, before tasting the new rice, it is customary to make an offering using eggs to honor the spirits of recently deceased family members.

Results

- (i) In both Bodo and Karbi mythology the egg is said to be the beginning of life and/or cosmos.
- (ii) The egg is also symbolic of ecological interdependence, emphasizing harmony between human and natural world.
- (iii) Agricultural, medicinal, purification and life-cycle rites involving the egg emphasize its status as an object of fertility, preservation and environmental equilibrium.
- (iv) The egg, as a common cultural metaphor of oneness and collective origin promotes social harmony and sustainable interaction with nature.

Conclusion

The egg holds countless symbolic significances in both folk narratives. In the Boro Kachari jwnwm janayni solo, it embodies ecological and moral dimensions. The first egg, broken prematurely, generates disorder-spirits, insects, and plants that appear in a chaotic form. The remaining eggs, preserved through patience, give birth to humans, emphasizing the importance of respecting natural processes. Thus, the egg serves as a bridge between nature and spirituality. It conveys the understanding that all forms of life are interconnected and sustained by the same natural cycle. Through its use in rituals and ecological beliefs, the egg becomes a sacred reminder of fertility, continuity, and the balance of the environment, values deeply embedded in the Bodo worldview. In the Karbi Mosera, it represents the collective womb of nature,

¹³ <http://krepublishers.com/02-Journals/T-Anth/Anth-40-0-000-20-Web/Anth-40-1-3-000-20-Abst-PDF/T-Anth-40-1-3-016-20-2054-B-S/T-Anth-40-1-3-016-20-2054-B-S-Tx.pdf>

where humans, trees, and stones share origin. The setting of the egg beneath trees and stones highlights humans' deep connection to the landscape and reflects the idea that life is nurtured within natural cycles. Both myths convey that creation is relational. Life emerges not from a solitary divine will but through interactions among multiple elements, the egg, soil, water, trees, and living beings. The egg, as a central symbol, embodies potential, unity, and the necessity of patience and harmony. The study highlights the importance of oral traditions as vehicles for ecological, emphasizing that myths are not merely cultural artifacts but active expressions of sustainable human-nature relationships. Future research may extend this framework to other ethnic groups in Northeast India or to cross-cultural studies of cosmic egg symbolism worldwide.

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Informant

13. Name- Mr. Bronson Teron, Village- Pator Sing Senar Gaon, Dist-Karbi Anglong, Assam, Age: 52, Occupation: Government employee.