

When Flowers Tell Stories: Folklore of the Kokborok-Speaking People

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Abstract

In Kokborok oral tradition, *khum* (flower) is more than a plant: flowers carry stories, emotions, social values, and seasonal knowledge. This paper examines flower folklore among the Tipra people through two narratives, *Khumpui* and *Kherengbar*, and through the traditional floral calendar (Singsang, Dukmali, Madhabilata, Khum Sarik, Hengra). *Khumpui* tells of two sisters, a python who appears to one of them as a prince, and a flower that marks a hidden burial and lasting grief. *Kherengbar* tells of a newly married couple, a heavenly flower, and a husband transformed into a hoolock after his wife breaks his warning. The paper argues that flower folklore connects women's labour, marriage customs, human–nature relationships, temptation, loss, and seasonal knowledge, and that it should be systematically documented as Kokborok cultural heritage.

Keywords: Kokborok, folklore, oral tradition, Khumpui, Kherengbar, floral calendar, Chamari Ompa, cultural memory, Tripura

1. Introduction

Folklore, which includes tales, songs, proverbs, beliefs, and traditional knowledge, preserves a community's memory, values, and relationship with its environment. Among Kokborok-speaking communities, elders and storytellers pass such knowledge to younger generations through everyday speech. These narratives retain local vocabulary, agricultural knowledge, and kinship terms that written history often lacks.

Flowers hold a special place in this heritage. They are remembered not only for beauty and fragrance but also for the stories attached to them, which concern love, sorrow, sacrifice, death, and supernatural encounters. This paper examines the *Khumpui* and *Kherengbar* narratives and the traditional floral calendar, arguing that in Kokborok folklore flowers function as cultural symbols that preserve the voices of earlier generations.

2. Methodology

The paper is based on oral narratives remembered from forefathers and family tradition. Oral stories vary by village, narrator, and occasion, so the versions here are documented, not definitive.

Item	Detail
Narrator	Sambhu Laxmi Debbarma, aged 61
Locality	Jong Para, West Ratanpur, ADC Village, PO Gabordi, PS Takarjala, Sepahijala District, Tripura
Date of collection	20 November 2023
Language	Kokborok (Tiprakok)
Collector	Basudeb Debbarma
Mode	Interview, family narration, audio recording

Key terms: *Khum* (flower); *Huk* (jhum field); *Gairing* (shelter in the field); *Ochai* (traditional priest); *Dao* (cutting implement); *Chamari Ompa* (pre-marriage period when the prospective groom stays at the bride's home to prove his suitability); *Maitram* (the husband's return to his own home with his wife after marriage).

3. Flowers and the Traditional Calendar

Before watches and printed calendars, many Kokborok speakers read the seasons and the hours from flowers. Singsang, Dukmali, Madhabilata, and Khumtoya bloom around the start of the Tipra New Year (*Tipra Bisi Kwtal*), which falls in the third week of December; the first month, *Talhing Tal*, begins on 22 December. Khum Sarik blooms as the day moves toward sunset. Hengra blooms in the evening and falls as night ends.

Flower	Traditional association
Singsang, Dukmali, Madhabilata, Khumtoya	Beginning of the Tipra New Year season
Khum Sarik	Nearness of sunset
Hengra	Evening and night; falls at the end of night

This was a system of environmental knowledge in which colour, fragrance, and flowering signalled agricultural seasons and daily time.

4. The Narratives

4.1 Khumpui

An Ochai with no son has two daughters, Raima and Saima, who cultivate the jhum field themselves. Sheltering from heavy rain, Raima vows that whoever builds them a gairing, human or not, will receive her love. A shelter appears the next day. Saima calls the unseen builder as "brother-in-law," and a large python arrives. Only Raima sees him as a handsome prince.

When the father learns that his weakened daughter has been sharing food with a python, he grows angry. He takes Saima to the field, has her call the python, and kills it with a dao. The body is cooked and served at home, and Raima finds her beloved's finger in the meal. Some remains are buried near a river. Later the sisters find a flower, Khumpui. It blooms fresh when Raima holds it and withers in Saima's hand. Raima

calls to the water, which rises to her feet, waist, and neck, and she sinks into it. The flower remains the sign of her love, grief, and the hidden burial.

Note: The song in this tale includes a line implying a woman who cannot bear seven sons is not fully a woman. This reflects a traditional gendered view and must be read in its historical context, not endorsed as a contemporary value.

4.2 Kherengbar

After Chamari Ompa, in which the bride's family tests the young man's character and willingness to work for periods ranging from two or three months to a year, the couple marry and travel to the husband's home (Maitram). In the forest they notice an extraordinary fragrance. The husband names it as Kherengbar, the flower of heaven, which must first be offered to the divine before personal use.

The wife asks for one. The husband warns her not to touch it until he has climbed down, then picks a flower. Overcome by its scent, she takes it and smells it, and he cannot descend: he becomes a hoolock gibbon. The divine power, moved by the couple's suffering, takes the flower's fragrance away so the tragedy will not recur. This explains why Kherengbar no longer smells as it once did. Some versions also link the wife to a lizard, a detail that needs confirmation from other narrators.

5. Cultural Interpretation

- **Women's labour:** Raima and Saima clear, burn, and sow the jhum field, showing women's central role in household survival.
- **Marriage and responsibility:** Chamari Ompa and Maitram show marriage as tied to family approval, labour, and social obligation.
- **Human and non-human relationships:** The python-prince and the hoolock husband show fluid boundaries between humans and other beings. The forest is a living cultural space.
- **Flowers as witnesses:** In *Khumpui* the flower reveals a burial and preserves grief; in *Kherengbar* it stands for sacredness, temptation, and irreversible loss.
- **Nature as calendar:** Flowers encoded knowledge of seasons and time.

•	Khumpui	Kherengbar	Floral calendar
Theme	Love, family conflict, grief	Marriage, temptation, transformation	Seasonal and daily time
Supernatural element	Python appears as prince	Husband becomes a hoolock	Flowers indicate time
Lesson	Love and memory survive tragedy	Nature must be respected	The environment carries knowledge

6. Preservation

A community-based documentation programme should:

1. Record stories from elders, storytellers, priests, farmers, and women knowledge-holders, with the narrator's consent.
2. Transcribe first in Kokborok, then translate into English and Bengali, noting narrator, age, village, date, and context.

3. Preserve songs, calls, ritual expressions, and pronunciation, and compare versions without ranking them.
4. Record each flower's local name, habitat, flowering period, and cultural meaning alongside its story, and add botanical names without replacing Kokborok ones.
5. Build audio, video, photographic, and written archives, and bring the stories into school and university materials.

7. Conclusion

Khumpui and *Kherengbar* show that flowers in Kokborok folklore carry memories of love, labour, marriage, temptation, transformation, and grief, while the floral calendar shows them serving as an indigenous system for reading time and season. These narratives are valuable sources for the study of Kokborok language, literature, ecology, and identity, and documenting them from elders in Kokborok will help keep them alive for future generations.

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