

## The Socio-Cultural Contexts of Recent Loan Substitutions in Kokborok

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### Abstract

Kokborok is a Tibeto-Burman language spoken in Tripura and parts of Bangladesh. The basic vocabulary is Tibeto-Burman, descended from a common Sino-Tibetan stock. Additionally the language has acquired a substantial stock of Indo-Aryan loans adopted through several centuries of cultural contact with the Bengali speaking population of the region. Several terms denoting new ideas and objects have been borrowed from Indo-Aryan, with modifications coming through native speech habits. Some words from foreign sources have also been acquired through Bengali. Historically this tendency has been part of the older process of cultural assimilation. However, in recent times there has been a tendency to find native equivalent for borrowed terms and the substitution of those terms in literary usage. The present paper shall endeavour to analyse the processes and also relate them to changing socio-cultural relations and altered paradigms.

**Key words:** Tibeto-Burman, Indo-Aryan, Bengali, Cultural Assimilation, Loan words, Coinages

### Kokborok Language and Community

Since long North East India has been a place of diverse cultural amalgamation. It includes several states, popularly known as the “Seven sisters”. They are Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. These states consist of native tribes, each having their distinct traditions, such as, art, food, dress, culture, dance, music and life styles. Roughly, these states speak 220 languages, belonging mainly to three language families, namely Indo Aryan, Sino-Tibetan and Austric.

Kokborok is spoken by the major ethnic community of Tripura. The official identities of the Kokborok speaking communities are

- The Debbarma and some Tripuri communities using the surname Tripura,
- The Reang community which speaks the Kaubru dialect,
- The Jamatias,
- The Rupini and the Koloï, though allied with the Halam's also use distinct varieties of Kokborok, and
- The Uchoi.

The language is genetically related to Boro, Dimasa, Tiwa, Garo, Rabha, Koch and Deuri; together these sister languages constitute the Bodo-Garo-Koch sub-branch of the Bodo-Jingpho-Northern Naga branch of the Tibeto-Burman sub-family of Sino-Tibetan Language. Outside Tripura, there is also a sizable population residing in Khagrachari Hills District of the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh.

Grierson mentions in his *Linguistics Survey of India* (1927) about the richness of Kokborok language. But with the passage of time, the language has acquired a large number of loans from Bangla, Arabic, Persian, Austric and English in the process of cultural contact and assimilation. No doubt, these loans have enriched the Kokborok vocabulary but, at the same time, several old terms have also been lost. This paper shall attempt to discuss the nature of loan words in Kokborok, their nativisation and also the recent tendency to substitute several of these loans with native equivalents.

### Indo-Aryan Loans

Through several centuries of cultural contact with the Indo-Aryan/Bengali speakers, Kokborok has acquired many words which have been nativised according to the features of the language. Many old words have been lost altogether. The following is a brief list of Indic loans that are now a part of the Kokborok lexicon.

Bengali	IPA	Loan Words in SSD	Gloss
মামা	ma.ma	ma.ma	'mother's younger brother'
কলম	ko.lɔm	ko.lom	'pen'
কুয়া	ku.a	ku.a	'well'
দলিল	do.liɽ do.lil	do.lil	'deed'
কাকা	ka.ka	ka.ka	'father's younger brother'

**Table 1**

In Traditional Tripuri society, i.e, at the time when the community subsisted by jhuming, the notion of landed property did not exist. The term /do.lil/ entered into the Kokborok language sometime after the Tripuris began to settle down in permanent villages and became familiar with the ownership of the land on which the homestead stood, as well as the land which could be calculated annually or seasonally to grow wet rice in the manner of the plains dwelling Bengalis. The term for ‘pen’ too became popular when the awareness of literacy grew. Mention must also be made of the fact that the native term for ‘father’s younger brother’ is /khrà/, but it has been replaced by the Bengali equivalent /ka.ka/; today, Kokborok /khrà/ is almost obsolete and its use is restricted to a generation that has only a few very old individuals alive.

One of the processes of nativisation is the substitution of the phonemes.

### Substitution of Phonemes

Bengali	IPA	Loan Word inSSD	Gloss
পশ্চিম	poʃ.cʃim	po.sim	‘west’
পয়সা	poe.ʃa	pui.sa	‘coin’
জুতা	ʃu.to	dzu.ta	‘shoe’
ছাতা	cʃha.ta	sa.ti	‘umbrella’
কড়াই	ka.ɽai	ka.raï	‘frying pan’

**Table 2**

The Indo-Aryan term /poʃ.cʃim/ is pronounced as /po.sim/ in KB. The intervocalic consonant sequence /ʃcʃ/ is simplified to /s/. Among other changes, we notice the modification of Indo-Aryan /ʃ/ and /cʃh/ to Kokborok /s/ as in the correspondences for ‘coin’ and ‘umbrella’. The stop consonants are retained but Kokborok /dz/ is more fronted than Bengali /ʃ/. Palatal retroflexes or the so called cerebral articulations of Indo-Aryan are simplified to pre-palatal or alveolar consonants, as in the case of the equivalents for ‘frying pan’.

The next instance of nativisation is compounding.

## Compounding

As compounding of words is a significant feature of the language, monosyllabic words are clustered together to form new compounds. Thus, along with the loan word a native word is added to give a different meaning to the word loaned into Kokborok. For instance,

muí.lok (n)

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muí (n) + lok (v)

(vegetable) + (long) = 'a vegetable having a long structure' (etymological meaning)

The term /muí/ in Kokborok can be used to convey two meanings – 'curry' and 'vegetable'. In words like /muí.ku.thúŋ/ 'a raw vegetable', /muí.mo.róŋ/ 'a variety of wild yam', the initial syllable refers to a vegetable. But in instances like /a.muí/ 'fish curry', /wá.han.muí/ 'pork curry' are used to refer to a curry.

Here, *muí.lok* is a bisyllabic word where /muí/ 'vegetable' is compounded with /lok/ 'long' nativised from the Bengali term /lao/ 'gourd'. /lok/ is conceived by native users to be related to /kò.lòk/ 'that is to be long'; however the form /lok/, which has a parallel form, seems to have being derived from /lao/. In this the KB class term for vegetable, that is /muí/ is added to form a hybrid compounding in /muí.lok/. This feature of compounding in KB will be detailed in a subsequent section.

## Foreign Loans through Education and Cultural contact

Apart from Bengali, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many non-native words were introduced through education and cultural contact. The following instances show the nativisation of certain English terms.

English	IPA	SSD
'table'	teɪ.bl	te.bil
'blackboard'	blæk , bɔ:d	be.lek.but
'duster'	dʌstə	das.tar

'rubber'	rʌ.bə	ra.bar
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**Table 3**

In the first instance, the second syllable of the word/tei.bl/ shows the case of epenthesis where the vowel /i/ is inserted between the consonant cluster /b/ and /l/. At the same time the palatal retroflex /ʃ/ becomes the unaspirated dental /t/. In case of the second instance, the bisyllabic compound /blæk.bə:d/ becomes trisyllabic /be.lek.but/, wherein again an epenthesis intrusion of the vowel /e/ between the consonant cluster /b/ and /l/ occurs in the first syllable. Along with the substitution of the phoneme /ɔ:/ with back rounded /u/ in the second syllable, and replacement of the stop consonant voiced pre-palatal /d/ with the voiceless dental /t/. Finally, the first syllable of the next two instances shows the substitution of the back vowel /a/ with the central vowel /ʌ/. Here the final /r/ is rarely articulated in British English, but in KB / das.tar/ and / ra.bar/, final /r/ is prominently pronounced.

### Loan Replacements

But from second half of 20<sup>th</sup> century, Kokborok writers and Literatures have made commendable attempts to find parallel Kokborok terms that could be used to substitute several loans, especially those borrowed earlier from Indo-Aryan and other foreign sources. A representative list of recent replacements is given in the table below.

English	Coinages
'office'	táj.nòk
'telephone'	kòk.dùk
'poem'	kòk.lòp
'teacher'	phù.ruŋ.nai
'pen'	sui.kóŋ
'school'	ruŋ.nòk

**Table 4**

The above compounds in SSD words are nouns and they consist of a combination of a verb and a noun. For instance,

táj.nòk (n)

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táj (v) + nòk (n)

(work) + (house) = 'a house of work'

Here, *táj.nòk* 'office' is a combination of *táj* 'work' and *nòk* 'house', two root words which give a new meaning i.e, 'a house of work'. Similarly,

kòk.dùk (n)

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kòk (v) + dùk (n)

(speech) + (string) = 'a speech delivered through a string/wire'

*kòk.dùk* 'telephone' again consists of two words having their individual meanings, *kòk* meaning 'speech' while *dùk* denoting 'something related to string/wire'. But when these two terms are combined together it gives a different meaning 'a speech delivered through a string/wire'.

*kòk.lòp* (n)

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kòk (v) + lòp (n)

(speech) + (to adore) = 'a speech delivered to adore someone or something'

In the same way, the new substitution *kòk.lòp* again is a combination of a verb and a noun. Literally, *kòk.lòp* consists of *kòk* meaning 'speech' and *lòp* means 'to adore or in memory of'.

sui.kóη (n)

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sui (v) + kóη (n)

(write) + (straight and long stick)

'Pen' is coined as *sui.kóη*, *sui* means 'to write' while *kóη* means 'a straight long stick'. So, the word *sui.kóη* is coined to convey the utility and the structure of the object.

ruŋ.nòk (n)

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ruŋ (v) + nòk (n)

(learn) + (house) = ‘a house to learn’

Again, *ruŋ.nòk*, the combination of *ruŋ* and *nòk* gives a new term. Here *ruŋ* means ‘to learn’ and *nòk* ‘house’ are two individual words which can stand on their own, but when combined gives out a new word with a new meaning, i.e, *ruŋ.nòk* - ‘a house where we learn’.

Another interesting coinage is the term for ‘teacher’:

phù. ruŋ. nai (n)

/ | \

phù- + ruŋ (v) + -nai

Teacher is coined as */phù. ruŋ. nai/*, means ‘a person who teaches’; a trisyllabic word where a root word */ruŋ/* ‘learn’ is combined with the causative prefix */phù-/* and the dubitative future suffix */-nai/*.

### Conclusion

To conclude, Kokborok has acquired many loans from foreign languages in the process of cultural assimilation. This assimilation introduced new words in the lexicons which resulted in the enrichment of the Kokborok vocabulary. At the same time, the process of nativisation also brought out specific features of Kokborok, such as, tones, compounding and presence of certain phonemes which are absent in the Indo-Aryan and in other foreign languages. For instance, there are three fricatives */s/*, */ʃ/* and */h/* in Indo-Aryan. But the fricative */ʃ/* is absent in Kokborok, the same fricative when found in Indo-Aryan words, is replaced with the voiceless fricative */s/* in Kokborok thus nativising it. Such change is observed in the word */rik.ʃaw/* loaned as */rik.sa/*. And based on these features the Kokborok writers attempted to find parallel terms to the loans which resulted in the new coinages.

Thus, we find that the study of loan words in a language is important as it points towards cultural exchange and assimilation of communities living in close contact with each other.

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