

## Chakhwtwi ‘Alkali’ - Its Socio-Religious Importance in The Indigenous Kokborok Speaking Society of Tripura

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### Abstract

The socio-religious significance of *Chakhwtwi* ‘alkali’ in the indigenous Kokborok speaking societies of Tripura plays a fundamental role in their cultural practices, cuisine, and identity. This paper examines the historical and contemporary use of ash-filtered water ‘alkali’ among the Borok people, a key ethnic group in Tripura, and its importance in food preparation, medicinal practices, and spiritual rituals. The traditional process of preparing *Chakhwtwi* involves filtering ash from specific plants through bamboo containers, a practice primarily carried out by women. This alkali water is used in various dishes, such as *Chakhwtwi kwthang* and *Chakhwtwi kumun*, often for their medicinal and digestive purposes. Additionally, *Chakhwtwi* plays a crucial role in social events and rituals, symbolizing cultural identity and unity. During the 1960s, it became a symbol of indigenous assertion in Tripura, particularly during the formation of the Tripura Upajati Yuva Samiti (TUJS), the first indigenous political party. The consumption and preparation of *Chakhwtwi* thus represent a deep connection to the land, traditions, and a political symbol of the Borok people’s identity, distinguishing them from other communities. Through food, this indigenous practice reflects the relationship between culture, politics, and ethnicity, displaying how food traditions can both unite and define communities.

**Keywords:** Chakhwtwi ‘Alkali’, indigenous cuisine, medicinal practices, rituals, political identity, ethnic identity

The use of *thapla* ‘ash’ has been prevalent for various purposes throughout the human history, regardless of culture. Cooking of corn with ash was prominently used by Native Indians throughout North, Central and northern South America. The logic behind this used was that ash helped make it easier to separate the skins from the hulls of the corn, resulting in a stronger flavored product. While the Native Indians did not have an understanding of the nutritional value of foods, studies today suggest that the use of ash likely contributed to make them as healthier people. Similarly, the aboriginal people of Tasmania, Australia, would occasionally dip savory flesh into the alkali ashes from the fire, instead of using salt, before putting it to their mouth. In Papua New Guinea, the Gidra-speaking Papuans of the Oriomo Plateau consume ash from the two tree species, (*Melaleuca sp.* and *Acacia mangium*), as a native form of salt.

Some of the most well-known Indians living along the shores of the Amazon are the Yanomami. These Indians, who are also known as Yanam, Yanomanö or Senema, live in the south of Venezuela and in the northwest of Brazil and compose the largest indigenous tribe on the South American continent. According to the religious beliefs of the Yanomami, the soul can only achieve full salvation if the deceased’s body is burnt after death and if the ash is consumed by the family and the relatives of the deceased person. After the body is burned, the bones are crumbled, and together with the ash, the remains are put into some kind of pot, where they are kept until the second part of the funeral ceremony. During the second part of the funeral ceremony, bananas which comprise the most common dishes for the Yanomami are cooked and the resultant banana mush will be mixed

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with the ash and bone of the dead tribe member. Then, all of the relatives gather to consume this mush. This practice is rooted in religious belief, where the soul of the deceased former tribe member is absorbed by the tribe again and freed through this process, preparing it for salvation. If this ceremony is not performed, the soul of the Yanomami would not free and would be condemned to remain in the world of limbo between life and death. These are some of the instances where ash is directly consumed or used for the preparation of food. However, there are other cases, such as in the indigenous communities of Northeast India, where ash is not directly consumed but rather used in the form of ash filtered water (Alkali) for a variety of purposes, including washing, cooking, religious to medicinal uses. The method of preparation and the uses of alkali vary from tribe to tribe and from place to place.

Most indigenous people in the Northeast India widely use ash filtered water (Alkali) for a variety of reasons, as is true in case of the Boroks. However, the most common use is in the preparation of cuisine. The Kokborok speaking people such as the Tipras, Riangs, Jamatias, Noatias, Uchais, Koloï call it *Chakhwtwi*, Kukis call it *Changal*, Lushais (Mizo) *Chingal*, Chakmas, *Haro Pani*, Mog *Chakhraw*, Garos, *Kharichi*, Manipuri's *Utti* and the Karbi people use the term as *Phelo or Pholo*.

There are many indigenous tribal communities in Tripura, with the major group being the Borok people, who are linguistically related to the Tibeto-Burman group. History records that as many as 189 indigenous Borok rulers ruled the Tripura kingdom over different periods of time. The independent kingdom of Tripura became part of the Indian Union on 15<sup>th</sup> October, 1949. In Tripura there are 19 Scheduled Tribes as per the notifications of the Government of India: (i) Tipras (ii) Riangs (iii) Jamatias (iv) Noatias (v) Lushais (vi) Uchais (vii) Mogs (viii) Kukis (ix) Chakmas (x) Khasis (xi) Garos (xii) Halams (xiii) Bhutias (xiv) Bhils (xv) Mundas (xvi) Orangs (xvii) Lepchas (xviii) Santals and (xix) Chaimals. However, within these groups, there are many sub-tribes. Like any other community, the Borok ethnic groups have their own values, beliefs and ways of living.

The Borok people at one point of time were solely dependent of *huk* 'shifting cultivation'. Every aspect of their life was closely interwoven with this system of cultivation. To the Borok, land is sacred, every plants and animals including forest, rivers and mountains housed are believed to have various kinds of spirits- both benevolent and malevolent. It would not be wrong to say that the Borok, like many other indigenous communities, are completely dependent on nature for survival.

Salt was not known to the Borok indigenous people in the early days; however, they were aware of the need for salt and found methods for preparing salt supplements. One such method of preparation for a salt supplement is derived from ash.

### **Preparation of *Chakhwtwi* (Alkali)**

The use of *thapla* 'ash' plays a very important role in the Borok society, ranging from food preparation to medicinal uses. However, the most significant culinary item for the Borok is *Chakhwtwi*, which is made from filtered ash water. The preparation of the *Chakhwtwi* 'alkali' or ash water is not overly complex but rather time consuming. It is also pertinent to mention here that not all ashes are used in the preparation of *Chakhwtwi*. The most preferred ashes come from specific plants such as *athia thalik bwlai tei buphang* 'a kind of banana leaves and dry trunk', or of *siping buphang* 'stem of sesame', or *haruwa buphang* 'stem of mustard plant'. The preparation of the *Chakhwtwi* is typically done by women. The *Chakhwtwi* obtained through this method compensated the absence of *som* 'salt' in the early days of the Borok society.



**Pic: Showing collection of chakhwtwi 'alkali'**

Once the ashes are prepared, they are collected and put inside the *Chakhwi-khok* (literally meaning container for alkali, where *Chakhwi* indicates alkali and *Khok* stands for container) i.e. literally meaning the container where alkali is prepared. The *Chakhwi-khok* is a special type of traditional basket made from thinly sliced woven bamboo which is porous. The shape of the *Chakhwi-khok* is conical (radius= 23cm height=30 approx) and has a bamboo made handle towards its base. It is hanged inverted. After the ashes are put in the *Chakhwi-khok*, clean water is poured, and it flows through the ashes, collecting at the bottom in a container. Since the size of the *Chakhwi-khok* is small, water is poured repeatedly until the required amount of filtered *Chakhwtwi* 'alkali' is collected. The filtered ash-water i.e., *Chakhwtwi*, is collected then decanted and is used for *Chakhwi* 'alkali'. This entire process of preparing of *Chakhwtwi* or alkali water is called *Chakhwi tolmani* in Kokborok language.

The following cuisine may be prepared with the help of *Chakhwtwi* or Alkali:

**1. Chakhwtwi kwthang** (*Chakhwtwi* 'alkali' and *kwthang* 'uncooked'):

In this cuisine, the *chakhwtwi* is warmed separately. Thereafter, the ingredients like *moso sokjak* 'roasted chilly', *berma* 'fermented fish' and *hasing* 'ginger' which are crushed separately, are added to the warmed *chakhwtwi*. There is no need to boil further. To give better aroma of the dish, *hasing bwlai* 'ginger leaf' are often used as well. *Chakhwtwi kwthang* is typically prepared when someone in the family is sick, such as when they have a cold with feverish tendencies, or if someone has been ill for some time and is in the process of recovery, but lacks a proper appetite. This particular dish is prepared to improve the taste and act as an appetizer.

**2. Chakhwtwi kumun** (*Chakhwtwi* 'alkali' and *kumun* 'cooked'):

Here, the *chakhwtwi* is boiled, and thereafter, in the boiled *chakhwtwi*, the ingredients, mostly vegetables that can be easily cooked, such as vegetable leaves, different kinds of beans, brinjal, etc. are added and cooked.

**3. Chatang:**

The *chakhwtwi* is boiled in a container, into which vegetables such as bamboo shoot, stem of *arum*, *khamka* 'solanum sp.', beans, and brinjal are most preferred. Snails are also added along with the vegetables. In addition, *berma* 'fermented fish', chilies, and ginger are added. Aromatic *muiching* leaves are also added. In the preparation of *chatang*, no rice flour or paste is used.

**4. Chakhwi:**

The *chakhwtwi* is kept in the cooking utensil and boiled. Thereafter, chopped and slice *muya* 'tender bamboo shoots, *laiphang* of *athia* 'a particular banana stems' are cooked. In the absence of *muya*, dried bamboo shoots are used. The Borok people usually preserved bamboo shoots by drying in sun usually called as *muya kwran* 'dry bamboo shoots' to be used during the periods of scarcity. Among

the banana stems, the *athia* is mostly preferred. Snails are also added along with the vegetables. Thereafter, *berma* 'fermented fish', chilies, and ginger are added. In most cases, finely chopped pork and pig intestines are added. However, if snails are to be prepared in this dish, pork or pork intestine is avoided. For flavorings, the aromatic leaves such as lemon or ginger leaves are added. The young bees, dry meat, dry tender bamboo shoots are also used in the preparation of *Chakhwi*. At times, tender leaves of drumstick are also added. Young bees are also a delicacy and used in the preparation of *Chakhwi*.



**Pic: Muya 'tender bamboo shoots'**

**Pic: Chakhwi, a favourite dish of the Borok prepared by the Author**

Before the entire preparation, *mairum alowa* 'unboiled rice' is soaked in water and later ground into flour or paste, which is added just before the completion of cooking. As a result, the dish appears thick. The culinary *Chakhwi* is considered both an 'endo-cuisine' and 'exo-cuisine' to the Borok community.



**Pic: Chakhwi, the most sought after delicacy prepared with muya 'tender bamboo shoots' and sikamuk 'snails' prepared by the author**

In any public gathering, such as a community feast or marriage, the absence of *Chakhwi* is beyond imagination. When *Chakhwi* is served at such events, it must be served before any other curry as it is called '*mui okwra*' '*mui* meaning 'curry' and *okwra* meaning 'first/eldest' which literary means that it must be served first. There are instances, I have heard from the elders in the community that by mistake *Chakhwi* was not served first to a person and that particular person out of anger and taking it as an offence refused to take part in the feast. Furthermore, while serving it one must be careful to place it on the right side of the plate of the person being served. If, by mistake or ignorance, someone serves *Chakhwi* on the left side of the plate, it is seen as a sign that the person has not seen properly trained by their mother at a young age. In such cases, the individual is considered an undisciplined child or one who is unaware of social customs. Such person will be addressed as *Buma bo phwrwngya*, *bwsa bo rwngya*, *mwkhwra khaju khaya* which translates the meaning as 'the mother never taught, nor did the child learn, and they are compared to a monkey that never wears a hair barn'.

**Maikwtal Chaphuru** (*mai* ‘rice’ and *kwta* ‘new’): After the harvest is over, each of the families in the village prepares to consume the new rice. Before the new rice is consumed, it is cooked and mixed with *Chakhwi* curry and taken in the handmade *mai koke* ‘the rice take the shape of the warped hand’ and it is kept at the entry of the doorstep. At the same time, all agricultural implements such as *Damra* ‘a type of knife mostly used in shifting cultivation’, *Rwsam* ‘a wooden tool use for pounding paddy/rice’ and *Romo* ‘made of wood with which paddy/rice is pounded’, etc. are also given the *Mai koke*. Some of the *Mai koke* are put in the courtyard. Thus, the first harvested consumption of the harvested rice cannot be done without *Chakhwi*.

**Khuwa Karmani**: This ritual is performed, especially when children are ill. The illness may be due to various ailments, and during such periods, if the child loses appetite, the *Khuwa Karmani* ritual is conducted by the *Ochai* (the indigenous traditional priest and medicine man of the community). During this ritual, *Chakhwi Mui* (a dish made from *Chakhwi*) is prepared with snails, banana stem, and other ingredients. The ritual cannot be solemnized or completed without *Chakhwi Mui*. After preparing the dish, the *Ochai* takes the *Chakhwi Mui* to the *Lampra* (where a single road bifurcates into two or a junction of two roads, where the ritual is performed) and the *Chakhwi Mui* is left there. This dish, made for the ritual, is not consumed. Sufficient care, or *kwthar* (in terms of cleanliness), must be taken in preparing this dish, as the spirit needs to be satisfied in order for the child to recover from the illness and regain a normal appetite. This dish is not prepared for home consumption.

**Swkal Mwtai**: This ritual is performed to appease the spirit of the *Swkal* ‘witches’. As mentioned earlier, the Borok people believe in both benevolent and malevolent spirits, with the *Swkal* ‘witch’ being one of the malevolent ones. When someone falls ill, the *Ochai* (indigenous traditional priest and medicine man of the community) will perform a *Sema* or identify the cause of the sickness. If it is determined that the illness is caused by the *Swkal* or witch spirit, the *Swkal Mwtai* ritual must be performed by the *Ochai*. The *Swkal mwtai* is associated with women, and the *Ochai* will pronounce, ‘*bwrwirok nango*’ meaning that the cause of the disease is the displeasure of *Swkal* or witch spirit. During the ritual, the *Ochai* first prepares *Chakhwtwi* (alkali) in the house of the sick person. This ritual must only be performed at night and, traditionally, in the jungle or forest. After the *Chakhwtwi* is prepared, the *Ochai* goes to the jungle to perform the rituals at night. To appease the *Swkal* or witch spirit, offerings such as a black fowl, tortoise (in earlier days), and rice flour are made. Once the ritual is completed in the jungle, the *Ochai* returns to the sick person’s house and sprinkles the *Chakhwtwi* (which was prepared earlier) all over the house, then pours it in the courtyard. Thus, *Chakhwtwi* is used to ward off evil spirits.

Apart from preparing various types of cuisine as mentioned above, *chakhwtwi* or alkali is also widely used for washing clothes and bathing. In the past, when there were no soaps or detergent powders, *chakhwtwi* or alkali was the primary source for washing clothes and bathing. The most widely use made of *chakhwtwi* or alkali’ by the Borok women folk was for washing their hair. There is also a common Kokborok terminology used by the Borok women folk called *khorok sukha* which literally means ‘washing of head or hair’. This term signifies the day when the menstrual period is over. It is still common today to see Borok women carrying *chakhwtwi* or alkali’ in a pot and take a bath at common bathing place, such as village river, pond, or water tank, where it is shared among women for washing their hairs. As a young child growing up in the village, I would often see my mother carrying *chakhwtwi* or alkali in a pot and washing her hair in the pond or water tank next to our house.

*Chakhwtwi* or alkali is also used as medicine by the *Ochai* or traditional healer. The *Ochai* or traditional healer will chant mantras while holding *Chakhwtwi* or alkali water in a container, and the medicine prepared from it is called *Chakhwtwi pora*. This *Chakhwtwi pora* is then given to anyone suffering from stomach ailments.

Food is central to life and society. It creates social differences, boundaries, bonds, and contradictions. *Chakhwi* symbolizes the Borok national and cultural identity. During the 1960s, the indigenous tribal, or rather Borok, identity assertion and awakening were symbolized through *Chakhwi* 'alkali' and *Muya* 'ender bamboo shoots'. The Tripura Upajati Yuba Samiti (TUJS), the first indigenous political party in Tripura, was formed on June 10-11, 1967, at Kainta Kobra village in West Tripura District.

This marked the beginning of a new chapter in the identity and political history of Tripura, particularly for the indigenous people. The slogan of the first indigenous regional political party, Tripura Upajati Yuva Samiti (TUJS), was "*muya chanai... chakhwi chanai...*" (Literally means those who eat bamboo shoots and alkali-prepared food, unite). Thus, *Chakhwi* became associated with the identity and self-assertion of Borok people from the 1960s.

It is pertinent to mention here that Tripura, once an independent princely state, merged with the Indian Union on 15<sup>th</sup> October 1949. The merger brought untold miseries for the indigenous tribal peoples of the state. The impact of the partition of India and communal riots impacted the peaceful life of the indigenous tribal peoples as thousands of refugees were rehabilitated in the state with the active involvement of the Government. The properties such as land, cash, and other resources were provided as part of the rehabilitation package. The situation can be gauged by noting that within a period of about 24 years i.e., from 15<sup>th</sup> August 1947 to 24<sup>th</sup> March 1971, there were 6,09,998 refugees were officially settled in the state (Bhattacharyya 1988: 14). This reduced the indigenous tribal population to only 31% (Census of India, 2011).

It is against this backdrop that *Chakhwi*, as a cuisine, began to be promoted as a political agenda by the indigenous regional political party of Tripura. This is not the first time that food and food practices have been used to simultaneously promote obligations and allegiance while also creating social boundaries based on class, gender, or ethnic divisions. Such practices were also present in ancient times. This illustrates the role of food in representing and shaping the identity of the Borok people, who are fond of *Chakhwi*. The food clearly delineates the 'I', the 'us', and the 'them'. People tend to identify other communities based on their food. Thus, food can operate as a key factor in the identification of a group or an entire nation. While all foods have the potential to provide on the way into human relationships, certain foods can become more symbolically charged with meaning than others, as in the case of *Chakhwi* among the indigenous people of Tripura.

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