

BOOK REVIEW

Folk-Culture of Assam (in Assamese). By Birinchi K. Barua.
(Gauhati: Lawyer's Bookstall, 1961. Pp. 375, ninety-eight illustrations, price Rs. 12.)

This study of Assamese folk-culture deals with the folklore of fishes, serpents, fowls, betel chewing, foods, medicines, oaths, curses, ceremonial dances, festivals, house building, dress, ornaments, and handicrafts. It also includes a chapter on folk-literature. The author has accordingly divided the book into nineteen topical chapters.

The first chapter, "Assamese Folk-culture", is again divided into several sub-topics which, later in the book, have been developed into separate chapters, causing some repetition of material. The author notes that Assamese religious folk-beliefs have been considerably influenced by those of the Tibetan and Chinese. Cow and snake worship in Assam has been practiced from ancient times.

In many religious ceremonies, fish and chicken are necessary as offerings. In some Assamese communities people do not kill monkeys, but worship them. Almost everywhere the black cat is regarded as an evil spirit. The crow is considered both auspicious and inauspicious: its crowing is a sign of good news in some communities, and is regarded as an evil omen in others. The butterfly is a sign of good luck and marriage.

Stone worship is an old religious practice throughout India and continues even today in Assam.

The practice of tree worship can easily be traced to the Indus Valley civilization. Coins excavated from the Indus Valley depict trees along with certain gods and goddesses. The Tulsi and Hiju plants are still worshiped by the Assamese.

Rice plays a highly important role in the agricultural life of Assam, and has become enmeshed with many folk-beliefs. It is thrown on newly wedded couples to drive away evil spirits, and to ensure a goodly number of children. The worship of granaries and rain is of course associated with the agricultural economy.

Since time immemorial natural phenomena have been regarded as objects of veneration and worship. Rig Vedic people worshipped the sun, moon, stars, milky way, rainbows, earthquakes, flood and drought. Fire was considered as an expeller of evil spirits. At all religious ceremonies the presence of fire is still essential.

The involvement of astrology in Assamese life is manifest. Oaths are taken not only on the names of gods and goddesses but rivers, the sun, the moon, and other natural objects.

Under the sub-section on different ceremonies the author lists birth, marriage, and death as the most important *Samskaras* and describes many beliefs and practices connected with them.

Chapter 2: The author believes that the daily life (dress, food, etc.) of the common people is largely governed by natural phenomena. The placement of a village is based on geographical factors; and as Spring seems more sexually arousing, it is deemed the best season for marriage.

Chapter 3: The author deals scantily with folk-literature but does discuss some genres such as proverbs, jokes, songs, *märchen*, and lullabies. He feels that proverbs reveal the cultural and social values of a folk community. Different types of lullabies are mentioned. Folk-songs are categorized by function: thus marriage songs are sung at weddings. Different marital rituals precede different songs. The author regards the songs of Manasa (the serpent goddess) as religious and devotional types. Among seasonal songs, *Baramasis* are the best known. Separation, hope, and aspiration are the dominant themes of the *Bara-masis*, and Assamese folksongs generally seem to be concerned with love. The author feels that *märchen* present almost every aspect of daily life.

Chapter 4: As in Bengal, serpent worship enjoys great popularity. The snake goddess Manasa is worshipped by the several tribes in different ways. Goats and water buffalo are sacrificed to the snake deity, and emblems can be found in Assamese factories that betoken the popularity of this cult.

Chapter 5: A large body of folk-beliefs is associated with fish, which have a close association with Assamese life. The catching and eating of fish involve numerous rituals. Fish are regarded as auspicious and a sign of purity. In marriages, fish are given to the bride for good luck, as fish symbolize children and reproduction. In agricultural rites, fish are considered as important symbols of productivity, and are worshipped in various ways among the Assamese tribes. Fish are sacrificed to appease particular gods and goddesses.

Chapter 6: Folk-beliefs related to chickens appear to be purely Assamese in origin. Chickens have considerable ritualistic value among Assamese tribes. The chicken is a symbol of productivity; a chicken is killed at the first arrival of a bride at her bridegroom's house, and chickens are considered the givers of children. In the Sema-Naga tribe, a woman who has recently given birth eats a chicken of the same sex as that of her child.

Chapter 7: The Indian custom of betel chewing is widespread and ancient, and involves many beliefs and superstitions handed down for centuries. Betel nuts and leaves are indispensable on social and religious occasions and they help in love affairs. At weddings the exchange of betels between bride and groom is a sign of great love. In a Bihu song a lover tells his beloved that he became more enamored of her when she gave him a betel. The free giving and accepting of betels is governed by personal status, for should a higher caste person accept a betel from a person of lower caste, he may be excommunicated from his community.

Chapter 8: Some rituals in Assam are observed in complete nudity. The rituals for scaring away ghosts and evil spirits are performed naked. The use of obscene language is one means of driving out evil spirits. At the spring festival obscene gestures are made by the dancing boys and girls. Marriage songs are full of obscene words, and during weddings several obscene dramas are performed by the women to drive away evil and secure good for the young couple. Cursing can be classified into three groups: religious, moral, and social. The author describes several gestures used while cursing someone. Further on, he discusses the types and powers of various curses. It is widely believed that if someone is cursed by an elder man, the curse will come true.

Chapter 9: This chapter deals with house architecture and the types of Assamese houses. Geographical factors are responsible for deciding the type of the house: e.g., on river banks, houses are elevated. Only certain months are auspicious for house construction; no construction is undertaken during the annual dark lunar period of *Amavasya*. The author describes the types of houses, their methods of design, and their function; *namghars* are houses for social and religious assemblies.

Chapter 10: Describing styles of dress in Assam, the author expresses his opinion that the *rih-mekhela*, the most important women's dress, is believed to have originated during the time of the Ahom kings.

Chapter 11: Tea, rice, and tobacco are the principal food and drink in Assam. In addition the author gives a long list of vegetables, birds, and fish which are also eaten. Even today villagers still construct ponds to keep fish for their daily use. Nothing much is said about the beliefs and superstitions related to these articles.

Chapter 12: A brief discussion is given on folk-medicines and country doctors; many diseases and their cures are listed.

Chapter 13: As in other parts of India, rituals and ceremonies are performed on occasions such as *Purnima*, *Akadasi*, *Sankranti*, and at the times of eclipses. Since all rituals are attached to religious sects, they differ from one sect to another. The principal Assamese sects are the *Vaisnavas*, the *Saktas*, the *Saivas*, and the *Ganpatys*, but the lines between these are not hard to cross, since members of one sect often freely participate in the ceremonies of another. Such rituals often have great social importance; *Bihu* is the national festival of the Assamese people celebrated by all castes, sects and communities.

Chapter 14: Religious dances are generally performed at the time of religious celebrations. Peacock, tiger, and fish dances are put on by several tribes in Assam. In the Ao Naga tribe the four-person *Angamalu* is performed as an imitation of the fish dance. The *Nati* dance is particularly common among the Sakta and Saiva sects. It is purely religious, and similar to the *Devadasi* dance of southern India. The Bobo tribes placate the gods and goddesses with the *Kher-ai* dance. The author lists several types of songs performed with these dances.

Chapter 15: In describing the manufacture and use of musical instruments, the *Laupokari* (a one stringed instrument played while singing Boragi geet) is discussed. An important cottage industry of Assam is the handicraft manufacture of pots and utensils of all sorts,

baskets, bamboo works, engravings of gods and goddesses on wooden planks, ivory combs, knives, designs, and silk products.

Chapter 17: In this chapter the author discusses village community life. He finds that, though villages differ in food habits, dress, customs, and manners, common traits do exist. Intervillage festivals provide opportunities for exchange.

Chapter 18: Here the author discusses various Assamese dialects.

Lastly, in his concluding chapter, he stresses the great need for continued folklore collecting in Assam.

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A Study of the Korean Puppet Play. By Choe Sang-su.
(Seoul: The Korean Books Publishing Company, Ltd., 1961.
Pp. II + 124, preface, sixty-six plates, two charts, index, Price not mentioned.)

The Korean puppet play is preserved today by a handful of old players and folklorists. Mr. Choe has been one of the most active among them. Besides organizing some performances of the puppet play, he has also written a number of articles on the subject. The first half of this book consists of such articles retouched to form a book.

He has two topics to discuss, the origin and development of the Korean puppet play, and a study of the Ggogdu Gagsi Play, the one traditional puppet play of Korea that has play books.

In the Orient, the earliest record about puppets is found in a document written by Lieh-tzu. According to this record, as early as in the 11th century B.C., "Yen-shin had human images made by carving wood and had them sing and play." However, there is a good reason to suspect that these puppets were not dramatic characters at all, but were mere dolls.

In Korea, the oldest record on the subject is a letter presented by Choe Seung-ro to the king in 982 A.D. In this letter he suggests that the king prohibit the use of puppets in the national ritual ceremonies, because the labor and the expense involved have now become a serious burden to the people. When puppetry was practised on such a large scale, we are inclined to surmise it must have enjoyed a long tradition, and Mr. Choe has sufficient quotations on hand to support his supposition that there must have been puppet plays already in the period of the Three Dynasties, roughly from the 1st century B.C. to the 6th century A.D.

On the basis of etymological as well as theatrical evidence, Mr. Choe sees a close connection among the puppet plays of China, Japan, and Korea. In Korean, a puppet is called "ggogdu gagsi". Ggagsi means a bride or a young woman, the most common model of dolls. However, what "ggogdu" means in this combination is not immediately