

Cultural Heritage And Social Cohesion: Understanding The Legacy Of The Bukpuii Among The Darlong Community Of Tripura

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Abstract

The paper examines the Bukpuii, the traditional bachelor dormitory of the Darlong tribe in Tripura, as a cultural and social institution that significantly contributes to preserving their culture and the social cohesiveness of Darlong society. Historically, Bukpuii was an informal educational centre for transmitting indigenous knowledge between generations and promoting moral development. It constituted a repository of knowledge, a vessel of recollection: folklore, music, and dance were practiced and conveyed collectively. This study demonstrates how the Bukpuii influenced communal identity and discipline among men while imparting environmental stewardship through mentorship from elders. In light of modern challenges such as formal education, urban migration, and cultural assimilation, the paper advocates for the revitalization of these institutions through community-oriented, heritage education projects. The documentation of the Bukpuii lineage enhances comprehension of how traditional frameworks can guide modern methods for cultural preservation and foster the development of cohesive, sustainable societies.

Keywords: Bukpuii, Darlong tribe, cultural preservation, oral tradition, Indigenous knowledge, social cohesion, heritage, community education

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I. Historical Background Of Bukpuii

The *Bukpuii* (the bachelor's dormitory) was a central socio-cultural institution of the Darlong people of Northeast India, especially before the extensive reception of both Christianity and Western education into the region. The word "*Bukpuii*" comes from two Darlong words — *buk* (bachelor) and *puii* (house or big), meaning a house for unmarried young men living together. It served as a traditional institution used for education, discipline, and cultural transmission (Lalhmingliana, 2004). Sociocultural, the *Bukpuii* (traditional youth dormitory) is one of the very important institutions among the Darlong people. A cultural institution, the *Bukpuii* provided young men with fundamental life skills, community values, and cultural traditions. Their function and significance: Bukpuii: What factors have contributed to its diminished significance? The significance of Darlong Society in the 21st century: This paper offers a thorough examination of the lineage, significance, actuality, relevance, and decline of the Bukpuii in Darlong Society.

II. Role And Functions

The Darlong community possessed a Youth Dormitory referred to as Bukpuii in traditional Darlong society. This institution was crucial for the effective operation of the village. Taumdinga Darlong states that *Bukpuii* functioned as a bachelor's dormitory and an educational institution, often situated at the village's centre. Instruction was conducted via oral tradition. In Bukpuii, the youth also acquired knowledge of their societal roles and other significant responsibilities. Its contribution to Darlong society has been indispensable in the political, military, and economic domains.

The Bukpuii traditionally performed a significant role in overseeing various ceremonies, festivals, rites, funerals, and other special occasions within the village. The societal norms traditionally enforced on the male residents of the village were mandatory, and fulfilling one's societal duties was obligatory. *Bukpuii* resembles the *Zawlbuk* or bachelor's residence of the Mizo and Hmar, as noted by J. Shakespear (2008). *Bukpuii* was a location for training, discipline, and instruction in essential skills for the villagers. They were instructed in the essential and invaluable principles of discipline, diligence, and the ethos of service.

In traditional Darlong society, learning was valued, although informally, through imitation and guidance from elders. Malsawma Darlong, a respondent stated each village assumed complete responsibility for its

economic, social, religious, and political requirements, while the younger generations were educated and trained within the village community. However, there was no *Bukpuii* or any analogous institution for the girls.

In the *Bukpuii* centre, *Thlangvalulian*, signifying male elders, were tasked with the administration of *Bukpuii* and commanded respect and compliance from all members. The village head held de facto power over the *Bukpuii* but refrained from intervening in its daily administration. Each *Bukpuii* comprised both seniors and juniors. The responsibility of the seniors, knowledgeable in Darlong customs, traditions, folklore, and folktales, was to transmit these elements from one generation to the next. *Bukpuii* was utilized for teaching skills in folk music, singing, dance, and basketry.

Folklore and oral historical tradition have served as the principal methods for educating the village's youth about their history. Elders were often seen telling stories to groups of young children by the fire at home. In traditional *Bukpuii*, elders or priests had a significant role in narrating ancestral stories. Likewise, in *Bukpuii*, folklore and oral traditions are disseminated. Primarily, they would discuss their historical traditions and practices. Furthermore, they would examine their faith and the practice of animism, along with their methods of worship.

Bukpuii was an institution that imparted knowledge on various subjects, including instructing the young Darlong in martial arts, hunting abilities, combat techniques, and the craft of bow and arrow construction. The games were characterized by both official and informal elements, as numerous events took place throughout festivals. Indigenous education involves acquiring information about one's surroundings and identifying available resources. The cultivation trade is instructed at home, commencing with seed sowing; cultivation, harvesting, and seed storage are practically demonstrated on the farm. Parents and guardians at home are tasked with imparting knowledge to children, especially girls, on the execution of daily responsibilities. Parents bear the responsibility of imparting societal ethics and conduct to their children. Upon reaching marriageable age, young boys and girls receive education on the family from their parents and elders.

The *Bukpuii* is traditionally found in the centre of Darlong villages, where it serves as both a living space and training ground. Adolescent boys departed from their homes to reside at the dormitory, where they learned hunting, agriculture, warfare, ethics, music, folklore, and communal responsibilities. Older men or warriors with honours served as mentors, moulding the boys into responsible citizens. As younger boys learned practical survival skills in the *Bukpuii*, they also learned about the norms and values of their community that guaranteed continuity in Darlong cultural practices. The *Bukpuii* originates from old tribal customs in which communal living and collective rearing were essential components of existence. Analogous to the *Morung* of the Naga tribes and the *Ghotul* of the Gond people, the *Bukpuii* functioned as a training ground for young men to cultivate leadership characteristics, discipline, and cultural awareness, albeit each with its distinct customs and variations.

III. Comparative Institutions

The *morung* was just one of similar institutions among other tribes of Northeast India (most famously among the Nagas). Similar to *Bukpuii*, the Naga *morung* was a men's dormitory that served as a hub for education and socialization. Young boys were trained in tribal traditions, male bonding (Hutton, 1921) survival skills (Hutton, 1921), and ceremonies of warfare (Hutton, 1921). These dormitories were often elaborately decorated and had deep religious meaning for the community.

We had our indigenous schools, long before formal schooling was introduced, like the *Bukpuii* and *morung*. They also functioned as defence units because members of the dormitories frequently were on the frontline in responding to attacks or crises in the village (AO, 2002). These institutions recreated intergenerational knowledge transfer and were foundational to the tribal way of life.

Marriages were orchestrated, and instruction in community service and welfare was provided in establishments such as the *Nokpante* within the Garo tribe (Sangma, 1981). These dormitories were frequently seen as the foundation of the tribe's power, discipline, and solidarity. The dormitory culture serves as a prevalent cultural motif across various tribal cultures in Northeast India, albeit each possessing distinct customs and variations.

IV. Decline And Legacy

With the arrival of British colonial rule, the spread of Christianity, and the establishment of Western-style educational systems in the late 1870s and early 1880s, these traditional dormitories gradually began to die out. Christian missionaries sometimes thought of these dormitories as obstacles to moral uplift, and as church-centered communal life took root, the need for institutions such as that at the *Bukpuii* waned (Chhange, 1993). By the mid-20th century, however, *Bukpuii* had almost entirely faded from Mizo society, not too dissimilar to how *morungs* withered among the Naga.

While these institutions no longer exist, they are still revered through oral traditions, festivals, and academic research. They are frequently examined for their early examples of informal education and indigenous rule. Many such structures have been symbolically revived over the recent years as a means to reinforce culture and bring solidarity to the community (Longkumer, 2010)

V. Functions And Role In Society

The *Bukpuui* was more than just a dormitory; it was a vital institution that played multiple roles in shaping the youth and ensuring the cohesion of the community. Below are some of its key functions:

Education and Skill Development

One of the primary purposes of the *Bukpuui* was to educate young men about their responsibilities towards the family, community, and society. The elders and experienced warriors of the village acted as mentors, teaching them various skills, including:

That connected Darlong families, an important institution for informal education and cultural transmission of the traditional Darlong society. The elders/experienced warriors were chosen for their wisdom and leadership in helping younger members dissect life, as always has been usual with elders (Lalhminglana, 2004). This education was not limited to physical training alone—it encompassed ethical, social, and practical knowledge that was necessary for growing into a responsible member of society.

The Darlong, young men were taught hunting and gathering skills which helped them survive while they also learned agricultural practices that suited the hilly land. Also, they taught crafts (such as bamboo weaving, wood carving, and other artisan skills) for self-reliance and contribution to the local economy. They also shared traditional medicine and healing, teaching the youth about the use of local herbs and medicine from experienced healers. By doing this, the Indigenous knowledge systems were kept alive and transferred from one generation to the next.

As important was the moral and ethical instruction given to young men. Stories, rituals, and daily communal interactions embedded lessons for ethical living, leadership, conflict resolution, and moral decision-making. These instructions were designed to prepare the youth not only for life at home and simple tasks but also as leaders in the community and cuffs of social cohesion and glue for society. The *Bukpuui* thus became a key institution for instilling character, sharing knowledge, and preserving culture in Darlong society as part of this holistic system.

Cultural Preservation

The Darlong tribe, used the *Bukpuui*, or traditional bachelor's dormitory, as a centre point in cultural preservation. *Bukpuui* was more than simply a living space for unmarried young men; it was an institution of informal education, moral guidance, and cultural continuity. Its bamboo walls reverberated with generations of oral history, folklore, music, and dance that were, as part of the culture, carefully transmitted from the mouths of elders to the ears of the youth, carving the collective identity of the community.

At the centre of the *Bukpuui*'s cultural role was its role as a living repository of oral traditions. Elder members of the community — respected for their wisdom and experience — served as custodians of the tribe's knowledge and heritage. At night, they would gather the young people and narrate origin myths, and accounts of heroic ancestors' moralism which were not just entertaining but instilled principles of courage, respect, and duty to the community. These stories were critical in preserving the tribe's unwritten past, strengthening a common memory that connected the tribe through time.

In addition to entertainment, folklore, and storytelling acted as methods of education and socialization. The stories that helped young members of the *Bukpuui* learn how to behave appropriately, the gender roles and ecological responsibilities each person has, as well as how to avoid the consequences of disrespecting any spiritual or natural laws. These stories weren't set in stone—they evolved with every generation, staying relevant while keeping core cultural values intact.

As music and dance form an important aspect of Darlong's mode of expression, both were also preserved and refined through *Bukpuui*. Youth practiced traditional singing and dance forms for festivals, seasonal rituals, and community ceremonies. Such performances were more than shows of entertainment — they were acts of cultural affirmation. Songs held coded histories, genealogies, and spiritual beliefs; dances relayed events like hunting, harvesting, or courtship. And embodying these arts helped ensure that cultural memory, not just intellectualized, but almost instinctually, emotionally was embodied and passed on.

In these cultural hubs, songs, and dances learned in the *Bukpuui* were showcased during festivals such as *Tharlak Kut*, the start of the agricultural season. It also provided a platform for youth to show their learning and elders to see the culture of the tribe being passed down. So, the dorm became not just a classroom but a kind of bridge between generations.

Sadly, the *Bukpuui* has been slowly fading away for ages because of modernity and formal education systems. But the model it provided — communal living, intergenerational learning, cultural stewardship, is still a worthy one. Even as we navigate some of our current contemporary civilization's most vexing issues, *Bukpuui* reminds us that we can, and should, look to cultural preservation by recreating community centers, heritage schools, and storytelling circles that embody the nurturing, collective atmosphere of the original *Bukpuui*.

Young men living in the *Bukpuii* were expected to follow strict rules of discipline. They had to abide by a code of conduct that emphasized respect for elders, cooperation with peers, and dedication to communal service. The dormitory also played a role in the village's governance, as young men were trained in problem-solving, dispute resolution, and leadership.

During times of conflict or threats from rival tribes, the *Bukpuii* acted as a strategic centre where young warriors gathered, prepared, and trained for defence. The dormitory was often the first place where warnings of attacks were received and coordinated responses were planned.

Living together in the *Bukpuii* fostered a strong sense of brotherhood among the young men. They formed lifelong bonds, which played a crucial role in strengthening community ties. The dormitory system ensured that no individual was left isolated and that every member had a support system.

VI. Contemporary Relevance And Revival Efforts

Despite its decline, there has been a renewed interest in reviving elements of the *Bukpuii* as part of cultural preservation efforts. Today, the *Bukpuii* has been supplanted by Youth Associations such as the Young Darlong Association. Each village possesses a youth association or club to facilitate its operations. The Christianization and advancement of the Darlong community have diminished the significance of traditional customary legal practices. Consequently, there is a necessity to enhance and fortify the customary law in conjunction with the advancement and growth of the Darlong community. Consequently, efforts have been made to rejuvenate traditional practices, particularly in music, dance, and athletics.

Various initiatives have been undertaken to keep its spirit alive: Darlong communities organize annual festivals where traditional songs, dances, and storytelling sessions are conducted in a recreated *Bukpuii* setting-like celebration of *Tharlak kut*. Cultural workshops for young people help them learn traditional skills that were once taught in the *Bukpuii*.

In contemporary times, the Young Darlong Association (YDA) has taken over many of the roles traditionally played by the *Bukpuii*. The YDA serves as a modern socio-cultural organization dedicated to preserving Darlong traditions, fostering leadership among the youth, and promoting community welfare. Unlike the *Bukpuii*, which was a residential institution, the YDA operates through structured programs, events, and initiatives that address modern challenges while keeping the essence of the Darlong heritage alive.

The YDA plays a crucial role in community-building by organizing cultural festivals, leadership training programs, and workshops on traditional arts and crafts. It also actively participates in social welfare activities, such as education drives, health awareness campaigns, and environmental conservation projects. By providing a platform for young Darlongs to engage with their heritage while adapting to modern societal demands, the YDA ensures that the values and traditions of the Darlong people continue to thrive.

Efforts are being made to construct replicas of traditional *Bukpuii* structures as heritage sites or museums by the *Darlong Hnam Inzom* along with *Young Darlong Association*. Social media campaigns encourage young Darlongs to reconnect with their heritage.

VII. Conclusion

The *Bukpuii* tradition of the Darlongs is not just a traditional institution, which the *Bukpuii* institution represents: rather, it is a "centrifugal force" for social unity, cultural oneness, identity and moral consciousness of the community. Traditional Men's dormitory – "Bukpuii." As a community-based institution *Bukpuii* was an important institution as it served as a training ground to pass on cultural knowledge, and to instil or promote discipline, and the spirit of communal responsibility amongst the youth. Despite a range of outside forces that have caused the deterioration of these native structures to varying degrees due to globalization and evolving socio-economics, the institutions' substratum principles cohesion, respect, leadership and cultural pride remain still extremely important. Rejuvenating and retaining the memory and ethos of the *Bukpuii* is a testament to the rich cultural tradition of the Darlong and provides a model to scholars for reflection on how traditional knowledge systems are relevant for modern agenda in terms of social concord and intergenerational cooperation. Embracing this legacy, the Darlong community, and others that also have similar legacies, can derive strength and an identity from the past to shape a more solid and resilient future.

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