FOLK CULTURE RESEARCH CENTRE
OF NORTH EAST INDIA

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LORES OF NORTHEAST INDIA

In this edition

Folk Instruments of NE India

Folk Trails

Ka Shna Sur by **Upatyaka Dutta**

Folk Musings

with **Amulya Rabha**

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Editorial

May the FOLK be with us!

Music is happiness intertwined with our perspective on life, often narrating stories of fleeting emotions: of longing, loss, hope and celebration. It is an expression as ancient as life itself, yet as new as evolution. From the clapping of hands to the thumping of feet, from the gurgling of water to the rustling of leaves...music is just there, everywhere inspiring composers, story tellers and musicians all over.

Story telling has been an integral part of human existence since time immemorial. Oral traditions in the form of folklore, folk music or a folk craft passed down through generations have played a significant role in shaping and preserving history, heritage, culture and traditions. These traditions are not just echoes of the past but are invaluable keepers of wisdom, knowledge and identity of a community, tribe and even a region.

India's Northeast, home to diverse indigenous tribes and cultures, is a rich repertoire of such folk heritage, forming a rare microcosm of cultural diversity. Folk music and instruments are an indispensable part of life in the Northeast—whether during festivals, ceremonies, concerts, or casual gatherings. These instruments mostly crafted using locally available resources represent ingenious forms of sustainable craftsmanship - artistic, resourceful and enriching.

However, with the advent of modern and digital technology, most folk musicians and instrument makers, are struggling with livelihood and financial constraints. A craft passed down through generations, is now at risk of becoming endangered or even extinct, largely due to the increasing preference for modern instruments by the younger ones. This serves as a wake-up call!

Losing an indigenous craft is not just a cultural setback; it means losing an essential part of history, heritage, livelihood, and identity. The makers of these instruments are the guardians of indigenous legacies, some even the last surviving keepers of this knowledge. This makes the need for a sustainable cultural economy in Northeast India more pressing than ever, ensuring that traditional knowledge systems not only survive but evolve alongside modern technology.

Fostering awareness about the significance of preserving and promoting folk instruments has become all the more essential in today's world, where social media and AI- generated art are rapidly transforming creative landscapes. While it is crucial to talk, read, respect, and deepen our understanding of these rich traditions, it is equally urgent to find tangible solutions to ensure the survival of these indigenous legacies for posterity.

And to this unmatched allure of cultural traditions and human creativity, we dedicate the first FOLK edition to the resilience, spirit, wisdom, knowledge, identity, commitment and celebration of the indigenous.

They are, hence we are!

Girbani Deka
Editor

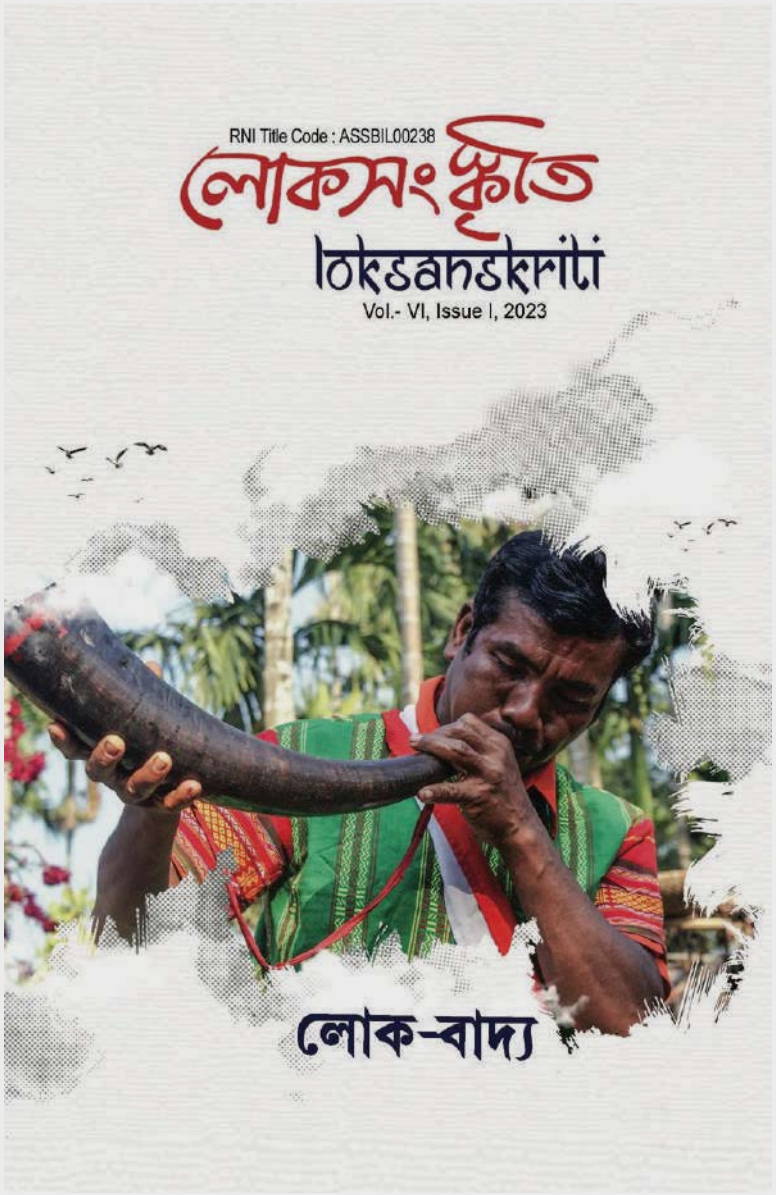
Hello FOLKS!

Here's to Northeast India:

A vibrant blend of folk cultural heritage, Northeast India unfolds as a narrative of unparalleled richness and diversity. A distinctive blend of cultural magnificence, the region stands as a unique microcosm of unity in diversity, where myriad indigenous tribes and ethnic communities weave together a multicultural identity. Yet, as a treasure trove of Indigenous knowledge systems and practices, Northeast India's stories remain largely untold.

In an endeavor to bridge this gap, the Folk Culture Research Centre for Northeast India is proud to unveil its inaugural English e-journal —*FOLK: Lores of Northeast India . This digital venture seeks to illuminate the uncharted depths of the region's folk cultural heritage, sharing its vibrant diversity with a global audience. Born from the pioneering legacy of LOKSANSKRITI —a bilingual (Assamese/English) journal launched in 2017 at New Delhi's Oxford Book Centre—this new platform builds on years of groundbreaking research and documentation of the region's Intangible Cultural Heritage. LOKSANSKRITI has long served as a scholarly compass, chronicling vital threads of tradition: Indigenous Textiles, Spiritual Practices, Mantra Literature, and the rhythmic pulse of Folk Dances, Songs, and Musical Instruments.

FOLK: Lores of Northeast India emerges as its dynamic successor, amplifying these narratives through a global lens. Its debut issue , Folk



Instruments of Northeast India , delves into the realm of rare and vanishing instruments, unravels the cultural economy sustaining their craft, and amplifies the voices of their makers—guardians of sonic heritage. Beyond this, the journal aspires to become a sanctuary for the region's Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Oral Traditions, and endangered languages—documenting, revitalizing, and celebrating them through interdisciplinary research and evocative storytelling.

We extend an invitation to inquisitive minds and passionate hearts worldwide to join this movement. Through cross-cultural collaborations, shared ideas, and collective curiosity, FOLK aims to foster empathy, understanding, and solutions-driven dialogue.

FOLK INSTRUMENTS OF NORTHEAST INDIA: A celebration

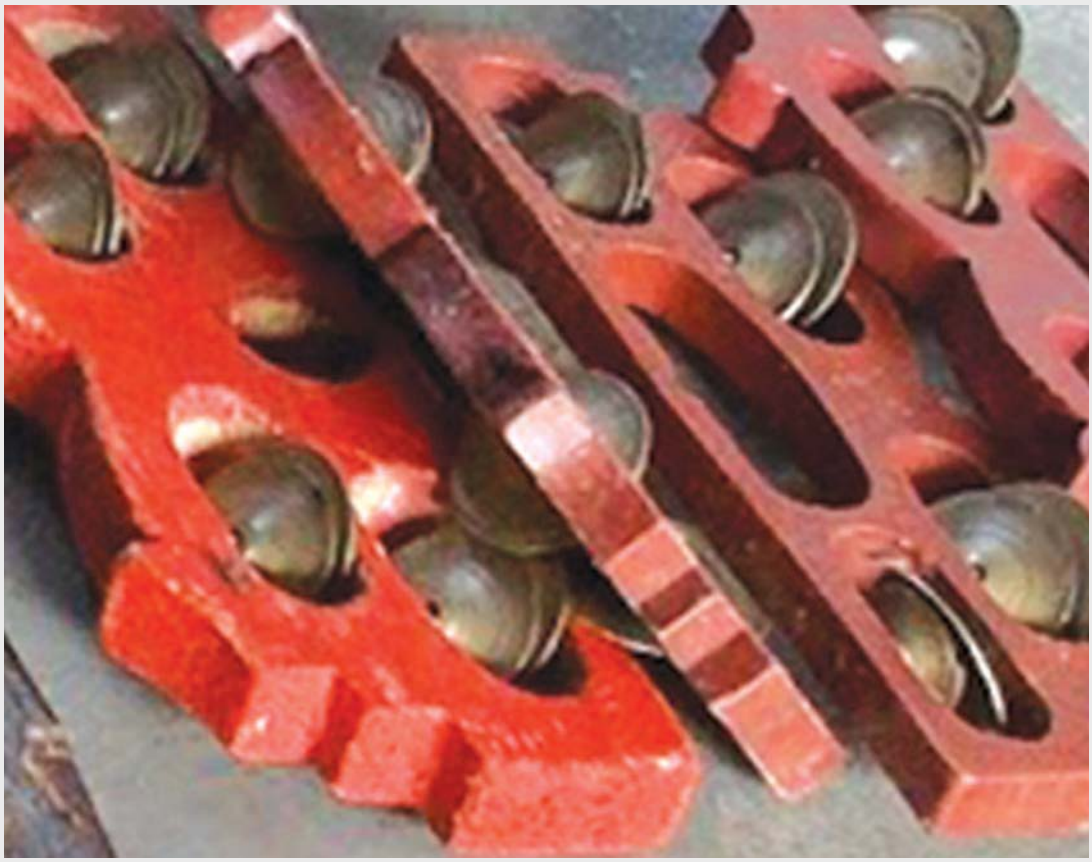
A rich repertoire of history
and heritage of indigenous cultures and traditions, Northeast India is a celebration like no other. The region resonates with the melodious Siphoong of the Bodo people, the revered Ka Ksing Shynrang of the Khasis, the energetic beats of the Garo Dama, and the divine Rangsina Sarpo of the Karbis. The Tai Khamti people's Turia Haikong Manyam, the legendary Kaarha of the Rabhas, and the Nrah of the Ruangmei Nagas are just a few examples of the unique symphony that defines our region.

In this maiden issue of FOLK, we celebrate with pride the distinct folk instruments of Northeast India, which embody our identity. Each piece in this section shares nine unique write-ups about the indigenous cultures that make our region as majestic as the beauty of our traditions.

ECHOING THE BATHOU SPIRIT OF BODOS

FOLK, Vol: 1, Issue: 1, March 2025

Dr Malabika Baglari



The history of musical instruments is not of a recent origin. It dates back to the dawn of civilization, with roots as ancient as the human race itself. In primitive times, thoughts were expressed and communicated by our ancestors using various sounds and words with gestures. Eventually such expressions formed the genesis of distinction between 'message' and 'music'. As civilizations evolved, instruments emerged, serving purposes both practical and ceremonial like beating the ‘Dhul’ (drum) to invoke rain and announce royal decrees, blowing the Conch shell to mark the beginning of battles and festivities, and using the Shinga (a buffalo-horn wind instrument) to proclaim victory. Many scholars concur that music and musical instruments originated from the primal sounds and vocal expressions of our ancient forebears.

Instruments can be considered as symbols or symbolical testaments of words through the creation of sounds. Words are supreme - they have the power to create, transform, and transcend. Even the divine faiths revered by the people often associate instruments with sacred significance, granting them a divine glory. In Hindu mythology, Dambaru (shaped like an hourglass and held in one hand) associated with Shiva, symbolizig the act and cause of creation; the Veena (a musical instrument with seven strings) of Saraswati symbolizing creativity of knowledge; the Baanhi (Flute) of Krishna symbolizing knowledge and devotion.

Folk instruments and music are almost synonymous, one remains incomplete without the other. With instruments, any form of expression be it dance, song or play

comes alive. The history of the musical instruments and music, are two sides of the same coin. A musical instrument hence is an elementary cause or an implement that can craft a sound that complements the music or the expressions. To which many scholars opine those sounds produced by clapping (a noise made by striking the hands together) hands or thumping feet have functioned as rhythmic instruments accompanying expressions since time immemorial. As a matter of fact, a simple act of devotion or meditation like the rhythmic chanting of mantras through words and hand movements can also called musical instruments. But this does not imply that various parts of the human body can be called musical instruments as a whole. However, the fact remains that the human body plays a crucial role in shaping the various vibrant tools of music. It is in fact the various parts of human body that inspired the shape of the instruments of music. For instance, the drum beater to play the Dhul (drum) impersonates the human hand while Karatal or Khutital (Clash cymbals) impersonates the human hand palm.

Folklorist Nabeen Chandra Sarma classifies musical instruments into three main categories:

1. Instruments associated with nobility or classical instruments

2. Folk musical instruments

3. Indigenous musical instruments of tribes

BODO FOLK RELIGION

Bathouism is the folk religion of the indigenous Bodo people of Assam in Northeast India. Composed of two words, Ba and Thou, it is based on the Philosophy of ‘five’. The 'ba' of 'Bathou' meaning five and 'thou' meaning deep/profound, together refers to the five fundamental principles or elements- Ha (Earth), Dwi (Water), Baar (Air), Orr (Fire) and Okhrang (Sky). The five belief groups associated with Bathou faith and philosophy are the Panchadevata (five gods), Pancha Bijmantra (five mystic syllables placed at the beginning of a prayer or incantation), Panchajnanendriya (The five sense organs), Panchaguru (the five instructors or preceptors), Panchachar, Panchabandhan (five bonds), Panchapallava (aggregate of twigs or young shoots of five trees) and Panchavadya (The five musical instruments). The community worships Bwrai Bathou as the supreme god. In the Bodo language, the word ‘Bwrai ‘refers to the ‘eldest’ man concerning power or knowledge. The Bathou faith is centred around the Sijou plant (Euphorbia splendens) which symbolises life or soul, as believed by the Bodo people. The Sijou is planted on an elevated altar, encircled with a bamboo fencing of eighteen pairs of posts woven with five pieces of bamboo split.

The Bodo folk instruments are closely intertwined with the indigenous faith of the Bodo people known as Bathouism

The five bamboo strips signify the five bindings of Bathou, viz. (i) birth, (ii) marriage or procreation, (iii) sorrow, (iv) happiness and (v) death.

In most Bathou religious offerings, the Bodo people usually sing:

"Bathouni Bandaua Bandauba, Siphoogni Garanga Garangba

shijouni shiria shiribaa, thaigirani bikhanga khaangba boroni aasaroni maonabaa."

(Which refers to the significance of the number five in Bathou faith-be it the five bindings of bamboo fencing that encircles the Sijou plant or the five types of Siphoong (flute) to five fundamental principles of Bodo faith and philosophy.)

BODO FOLK INSTRUMENTS

The Bodo folk instruments are closely intertwined with the indigenous faith of the Bodo people known as Bathouism. As already stated, five primary folk instruments form the core of Bodo culture and faith: KHAM (Bodo traditional drum), SIPHOONG (Bodo traditional flute much longer in shape than other flutes), SERJA (Traditional Bodo stringed instrument), JOTHA (traditional Bodo cymbal) and GANGGANA (traditional Jew's Harp).

These folk instruments are not just musical tools but also sacred elements of Bodo faith and cultural identity, playing a crucial role in religious ceremonies, festivals, and rituals.

1. KHAM:

The Kham of the Bodo people is a big drum that belongs to the family of Madals or Drums. Mostly made using the wooden bark of the coral tree and buffalo and goat hides this traditional instrument of the Bodos is sewn with animal skin on both sides. It measures approx.34 to 35 inches in length and approx.11 to 14 inches in width. The craftsperson prefers using the trunk of an old coral tree for crafting this traditional instrument. The drum beater used for playing the drum holds a special significance. The Bodos believe that the beater is a representation the hundred good traits of human nature and therein resides the Divine.

2. SIPHOONG:

One of the most popular folk instruments of Assam, Siphoong is a type of flute that plays a significant role in the socio-cultural life of the Bodos. There are many myths about the origin of this instrument in the Boro Kachari society. It is believed that the earth wakes up to the sound and melody of the 35-inch long siphoong flute made of Bijuli Banh (Bambusa Pallida, a kind of thin wild bamboo found in Assam).

3. SERJA:

Sarinda is a traditional folk instrument of North India, closely comparable to the Tokari and Dotara of Assam. Serja, a similar stringed instrument, is crafted from locally available materials and played with a bow to produce melodious and soothing music.

Serja is central to Bodo prayers and folk songs, serving as a reflection of their unique musical heritage and way of life. However, not everyone can play the Serja. The rules of crafting and playing techniques of the instrument are outlined in Bodo folk narratives. The instrument holds great significance among the Bodo people, being used in worship and as a medium for communication with the divine.

Across different regions, Serja is known by various names. The Rangkhal tribe of Cachar calls it Seranda, while the Kuki people refer to it as Sorinda.

Typically measuring 17-18 inches in length and 9-10 inches in width, the instrument is crafted by hollowing out the middle of an oval piece of wood, usually from a jackfruit or gamhar (Gmelina arborea) tree. It consists of several parts, including the stomach, neck, and head. A bow-like device is crafted to play the instrument, producing melodious sound waves. Traditionally, yarn was used to create melodies, but with modern advancements, strings have now replaced it.

4. JOTHA:

Among the five most important folk instruments in Bathou religious philosophy, Jotha or Taal holds a significant place. It is a type of cymbal made from copper, brass, or bell metal. This spherical instrument is played in pairs to produce melodious tunes, adding rhythm and harmony to traditional performances.

5. GANGGANA:

One of the most essential instruments among the Panchabaidya (five instruments) of the Bodos is the Ganggana, also known as Gagana in Assamese. This instrument produces a beautiful melody and is crafted from different types of bamboo and wood, depending on the region where it is made.

In addition to the Ganggana, there are various other folk instruments, such as Thorkha (primarily played during Bihu rather than religious ceremonies), Khonjori (made of two pieces of wood), Bingi, Ramtaal, Taal, and many such more.

USING BODO FOLK INSTRUMENTS: TIME AND PLACE OF USE

Since ancient times, religion and music have been deeply interconnected and used together in Bodo culture. In Bathou religious ceremonies, the Bodo people play folk instruments during the worship of Bathou Gods and Goddesses.

Bodo folk instruments are most commonly used during:

• Bathou religious ceremonies

• Baisagu, the spring festival of the Bodos

• Bathou religious weddings and death ceremonies

The Kherai Dance and Kherai Puja are integral to the Bathou religious system. The five major Bodo folk instruments play an essential role during the Kherai religious dance as well as in various other worship ceremonies.

It is believed that the Siphoong's tune awakens the Bathou gods and goddesses, entreating their blessings upon the people. In earlier times, worship involved sacrificial offerings, but today, deities are honoured with flowers, fruits, prayers, and hymns,

accompanied by the tunes of traditional folk instruments like Kham, Siphoong, Serja, and others.

Folk instruments hold deep cultural and religious significance in Bodo traditions, playing an essential role in various ceremonies and rituals. One such event is Darshan Kherai, performed during the first week of Kati/ Kartik (September-October) in honour of Mainao, who is identified with Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth. Similarly, in Bathouism, folk instruments have long been integral to Baisagu festival dance performances, where music and prayer come together in celebration of life and nature.

On the first day of the New Year, the Bathou Bodo people begin their day with prayers, accompanied by the melodic tunes of the Siphoong, which is believed to awaken and please Goddess Earth. This sacred connection between music and nature is further emphasized in Bohag (April/ Spring), when the community gathers at the Bathou temple to offer prayers for a bountiful harvest. The rhythmic beats of folk instruments are believed to invoke rain, soothe nature, and bless the people. Attending these prayer gatherings is also believed to contribute to long life and well-being.

Traditionally, folk instruments were used in Baisagu and Bihu Husori performances. Today, these instruments continue to be a key part of Baisagu and Bihu celebration that continues for days together. They also hold special significance in weddings, where listening to their tunes is considered auspicious for the bride and groom, and in funerals, where their use follows specific guidelines, ensuring that the music remains solemn and respectful rather than celebratory.

Over time, the role of folk instruments has evolved beyond their traditional religious context. Once used solely for spiritual and cultural rituals, they have now gained recognition as classical instruments. Many musicians and instrument makers have adapted them for modern music, leading to shifts in both their function and significance. The influence of commercialization has also played a major role in transforming how and where these instruments are used.

Despite these changes, the essence of Bodo folk instruments remains deeply rooted in tradition. While their use and purpose continue to evolve, it is crucial to embrace these transformations while preserving their cultural and spiritual heritage.

Translated by:
Bhargabjyoti Bora

FOLK, Vol: 1, Issue: 1, March 2025

KA KSING SHYNRANG:
A time-honoured Khasi Folk Craft

Daffni Banridor Kharkongor

[Daffni, a 22-year-old poet from Shillong with a bachelor's degree in English Literature, began writing at the age of nine and has continued ever since. She loves books, travel, and writing, drawing inspiration primarily from nature, her home state of Meghalaya, and the rich culture she was raised in. Cultures and folktales are sacred heirlooms that bridge generations and preserve indigenous existence and identity, and hence Daffni finds it essential to share the indigenous stories of her land and people with the world.]

Hailing from the Abode of Clouds and home to root bridges, Ka Ksing Shynrang ('ksing' meaning drum; 'shynrang' meaning male) is one of the many Khasi folk instruments that ties generations together through its rhythm and beat. Ka Ksing finds its association with the ancestral religion of the Khasis, Niam u Khasi ('Niam' meaning religion) and is deeply connected with religious ceremonies like Niam Iap ('iap' meaning death. Niam-Iap: ceremonies associated with death, burial and death anniversary) and Niam Im ('Im' meaning life. Niam-Im: ceremonies associated with the stages of birth and life).

CRAFTING KA KSING SHYNRANG:

The artistic dexterity of our ancestors has been passed down through generations, deeply ingrained in artisans and creatives who possess a natural talent and passion for music. This inherited legacy continues to inspire even today and nurture the creative spirit of our people.

1. Measuring Ka Ksing Shynrang:

In the past, our forefathers used ingenious methods to measure height, length, and strings for instruments relying solely on their hands. One such technique called 'tda', meaning to move like a leech, involved measuring from the tip of the thumb to the tip of the middle finger. Another method called 'pruh' involved using their elbow to the tip of the middle finger, for measurements. Sticks were also occasionally used for measurement. However, with advancements in technology and science, artisans today have adopted modern methods of measurement like the one used in measuring Ka Ksing Shynrang, which typically measures between 21 to 24 inches in length, with the hole measuring 9.5 inches on the right and 8.5 inches on the left.

This inherited legacy continues to inspire even today and nurture the creative spirit of our people.

2. Materials used:

Artisans use wood (ka dieng), cow skin (snieh masi), goat skin (sniehblang), bamboo (siej), sealing wax (laha) and iron ring (nar-sorkaria) for crafting the folk instrument.

3. Rituals observed in Crafting:

Time-honoured rituals passed down through generations of artisans continue to play a vital role in the making of traditional Khasi instruments even today.

In crafting Ka Ksing Shynrang also, rituals are performed to ensure the instrument's spiritual integrity and invoke divine blessings. Before sealing Ksing Shynrang (male drum), artisans place rice and charcoal inside the instrument and add a few drops of ceremonial alcohol as an offering to U Biskorom (a mystical figure in Khasi folklore who was entrusted by the Great God to teach humankind the art of craftsmanship) and to God, the Creator. Similarly, the rituals for Ka Ksing Kynthei (female drum), which is closely associated with the male drum, are performed during the application of sealing wax (laha). These rituals serve as a safeguard against any potential disturbances that might affect the instrument's harmony and balance.

COMPONENTS OF KA KSING SHYNRANG:

The right side of the instrument consists of:

i) Nar-Sorkaria (an iron ring)

ii) Syrwiang Heh ('heh' meaning big. It is a cane-like structure used for supporting skin of instrument)

iii) Snieh-Masi (cow skin)

iv) Dieng sohphan (Jackfruit tree used for the trunk of the instrument).

The left side of the instrument consists of:

i) Syrwiang rit ('rit' meaning small)

ii) Snieh-Blang (goat skin)

iii) Bthet (used for tuning the instrument)

iv) Jingkieng Ksing (strap)

v) Dieng tem ksing (a small stick used for beating the instrument on the right hand-side).

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE AND USE OF KA KSING SHYNRANG

Ka Ksing Shynrang or the male drum has been in use since the time of our ancestors. It has been a significant part of Khasi culture and has been used during religious ceremonies, rituals and occasions like:

i) Ka Lumpaid: A drum beat played before any meeting

ii) Ka Shadwait ('shad' meaning dance, 'wait' meaning sword): A drum beat to accompany the sword dance of the Khasis.

iii) Ka Mastieh: A drum beat to accompany the Mastieh dance.

iv) Ka Ksing is also played during festivals like the famous Shad Suk Mynsiem.

TRADITIONAL PERFORMERS OF KA KSING SHYNRANG

Musicians and performers skilled in playing traditional Khasi instruments, including Ka Ksing Shynrang, are known as 'Duhalia', which literally translates to musician. These individuals are well-versed in the rhythms and beats that accompany various cultural ceremonies, rituals, and dances, preserving the rich musical heritage of the Khasi community.

RHYTHM / SOUND OF KA KSING SHYNRANG

The sound of the folk instrument depends on the tension of the bthet, which determines the pitch. When the bthet is stretched and the sorkaria (iron ring) is raised to the right of Ka Ksing, it helps in adjusting the note and pitch, allowing the musician to achieve the desired sound.

FOLKLORE, FOLK SONGS, AND PROVERBS ASSOCIATED WITH THE INSTRUMENT

Ka Ksing Shynrang is believed to be connected to Jingrwai lawbei—the song of Ka lawbei, the first female ancestor of a clan, who is revered as a deity. Jingrwai lawbei is also known as the whistling lullaby tradition, a unique cultural practice still famously preserved in Kongthong Village, even before the establishment of Wahkhen Village. Ka lawbei is invoked during prayers for fertility, agriculture, and the well-being of families, reinforcing the instrument's spiritual and cultural significance.

FOLK TRADITION ASSOCIATED WITH THE INSTRUMENT

A longstanding tradition honours the process of crafting the folk instrument: The hole used for the bthet must not be directly pointed at Ksing Shynrang (male drum) or Ksing Kynthei (female drum).

IS THERE A SPECIFIC RULE TO STORE THE INSTRUMENT WHEN NOT IN USE?

Yes indeed!

There is a specific way to store the instrument when not in use. The forefathers passed down clear guidelines on how to properly keep Ka Ksing Shynrang and Ka Ksing Kynthei to maintain their integrity. Ka Ksing Shynrang (male drum) should never be kept upside down, while Ka Ksing Kynthei (female drum) must not be stored in an upright or standing position. These traditional practices ensure the instruments are preserved with respect and care.

CHANGES OVER TIME:

Over time, changes have naturally occurred in the instrument, though no specific rules or guidelines have been established for refurbishing or modifying it. One noticeable difference is in the maintenance of the bthet. While the forefathers never cleaned it, modern Duhalias (musicians) make it a practice to clean the bthet regularly. This reflects a shift in how the instrument is cared for, adapting to contemporary preferences while still honouring traditions.

SOURCE: Bah Komik Khongjirem, Co-Founder of Sieng Riti Institute, Wahkhen and Head Musician (Duhalia-Hima Khyrim) and his grandson, Pynkhrawkupar Khongwet.

In the rhythm of KARBI Folk Instruments

FOLK, Vol: 1, Issue: 1, March 2025

Dr.Dharamsing Teron

[A veteran Karbi scholar, and a cultural activist, Dr Dharamsing Teron is a pioneering Karbi who dedicated his life's cause to the promotion, preservation and documentation of the Karbi culture. He has authored, co-authored and edited several books and journals contributing to a wide array of authentic, scholarly and well researched documentation. He is the founder director of the Centre for Karbi Studies, a research organisation dedicated to explore and enrich young minds to develop critical thinking and understanding and to know the Karbi culture without any frills.]

Karbis regard music as a gift from heavens which is therefore so intimately associated with their day-to-day life. The numerous sacred life-giving worships to unseen spirits and sacred prayers, social interactions across time honoured customs and traditions are all expressed through poetically structured verbal performances.

The Karbis believe that Rangsina Sarpo, the Divine Musician, was sent from the heavens to teach the Karbi people songs and dances. His name is immortalised in Karbi folklore and sacred prayers. The sacred verses of Lunse Keplang (Origin of Singer), performed at important cultural and religious rituals, eulogises the Divine Musician, Rangsina the Great as -

Urti kangdunkso/Si Sum Karbi aso

Ave lun temo/Si kedo ki pen ko

Si bang Ru Songsar recho/Si bang i pharli tangthu

Bai Sum Karbi aso/Ave alun temo

Si nang Mirjeng musoso (le)/Sopirthe chelo (ra)

Parjan jangreso/Ja son Telehor langso

Bang apunso chokpho/Eru Rangsina Sarpo

Kedo run maro/Si asengkun re'o (si)

La le thandamnon/Lun temo pu Songsar recho

Si bang nangtoi musoso/Mirjeng musoso

Bang sominadar nanglo...

(When the earth was young, the King of Universe saw how the Karbis suffered due to lack of music and asked Mirjeng brothers to descend on earth and invoke upon Rangsina the Great to teach the them the art of music...)

Chutsang and Krungdeng, the two legendary drummers discovered the drum and its unique rhythms from the mysteries of Nature and the surreal world of spirits. There are legends which narrate tales of Karbi ancestors' encounters with other than human entities, Tiso Jonding (Tiso the Tall One) among them, gave birth to a new rhythm. The tradition, where facts and fictions fuse, has continued through surviving rhythms inherited from the Tiso (wild spirit) or Langpampi (waterfall).

According to a version of the legend, Sam Baroi created the rhythms. He created 'Chengpi', the instrument which originated in Karbi funeral rituals to communicate with and guide the souls of the dead to the world of the ancestors. He also created 'Cheng Burup', the waist drums that guide inmates of traditional youth dormitories in their community farming activities. In older times when rhythm was in its infancy, Karbi ancestors made use of 'Cheng Thailok' made of Thubong or Tarsing — the many varieties of reeds which infested their surroundings. A sacred verse dedicated to the legend goes:

Si bang eru hoidoi

La eru Sam Baroi

Si bang eru Sam Baroi (ke)

Asengkun rejoi

Si bang eru Sam Baroi

An bang phang'et arong roi

Si mengsu sainevoi

La eru Sam Baroi...

(Our revered Sam Baroi, who is insightful, he acquired the beechwood and created the rhythm...)

Karbis have known the use of various indigenous variants of the wind, string and percussion instruments shaping their musical traditions which have survived over time in the form of some of the following folk instruments—

1. MORI — is a single-reed instrument. According to the scholars, there is only 'one type of single reed known in Northeast India - the idioglot clarinet, which has a small reed cut from the surface of a cane tube inserted in a larger wooden or cane tube. ..and the Karbi people are the main group using this clarinet.

a. Moriso – has 6 (six) finger holes with 'cane sounding tubes and bells made either of wood or animal horn.' This is a distinct variety.

b. Morijangkek – is a similar instrument which makes bigger sound; one end tappers into an 'Akrok' while the other end ends into a funnel called 'Abongphar'; the instrument has seven finger holes; it is mostly used by unmarried youth serenading their lady-loves-

(a) Li'o li'o li'o le

Ningve lasa aningve

Hanbong araje keme

Chusang achuni sat'e

Jir'ik nangcharvak pame

Lasa kandunji mene

Oli...oli...lit....

(Tonight, is the night of Chomangkan, Hanbong is so beautiful, her lovely hair too is so beautifully plaited; she has worn a matching black scarf, isn't she taking part in the dance?)

c. Mori Tongpo – bigger than Morijangkek and made of wood which is also known by its other name called 'Mori Inglu'; this variety has 7 (seven) finger holes. The holes are made by using 'primsok' (thorn). Certain tunes/ melodies associated with death cannot be played. Such melodies are reserved for occasions like Chomangkan. There are competitions in Chomangkan. There is no taboo against a female playing the instrument, but it is not played in general.

Li li lit....

Toroling torole lembe

Toro inglolo torole umbe

Toro inglolo ore orot lit....

d. Krokdang a'mori – is a very unique and distinct variant of the idioglot clarinet as the tube is made of the leave of Screwpine (Pandanus), locally known as Krokdang. The long leaf, first shorn of the spines, is boiled and sun-dried to make it soft and flexible so that the leaf-tube (resonator), coiled around the mouthpiece, may be gradually enlarged and elongated to form a large rim for maximum sound.

2. PONGSI – is the Karbi version of bamboo flute with 5 or 7 finger holes which can produce a range of traditional melodies to express joy and sadness (pongsi ningri).

3. KRONGCHUI – is a member of the lamellophone and the instrument is generally used by unmarried youth. Married women avoid playing this instrument which is a local version of the 'Jew's harp'. It is held between the teeth and struck with a finger where the mouth serves as the resonator. It can produce only one note, but harmonics are created by the player altering the shape of the mouth cavity. The instrument is either made of bamboo or iron. Following is a typical lyrical representation of the krongchui —

Kong kong doi – kong dir

Doi doi di thedung thedung

Thedung dung longkiso ta

Thedung dung kethek kere

Paman dun thedung dung

Kong kong doi....

Krongchui was used by unmarried youth of opposite sexes to serenade each other – girls would ask their male friends to make the instrument as the initial gesture to express their love. Youth in their prime in older days would carry as essential items in their 'jambili' (unsewn sling bag) such as mori (flute), krongchui (jew's harp), ingthi (woven comb), mori aso (reed) etc. Girls also thrust krongchui into the tuft of their hair when they go out into the wild venturing for vegetables or fire wood in older days.

The instrument is held horizontally with the bamboo tongue in front of the opened mouth. The left end is hit by the thumb of the right hand. This makes the bamboo tongue vibrate which causes the sound. The mouth serves as the resonator and by changing the shape and size of the mouth opening, the overtones can be changed, thus creating melody. By strongly breathing in or out the volume can be changed as well. A metal version of the instrument is also used.

4. CHENG – Drum is indispensable to Karbi life. Cheng has played key rhythmic factor in Karbi traditional life giving the people their artistic and spiritual expression. Karbis pay great importance to both Cheng (drum) and Duhuidi (drummer) who they believe can alone guide the souls of the dead to the world of ancestors. Both Cheng and Duhuidi therefore have an important shamanistic role to play in the traditional death ritual of the Karbis. Without Cheng, a Karbi death ritual cannot be complete.

A very particular wood is selected for making Cheng. Most preferred wood is Phang (Gmelina arborea) which is free from moth attacks. A salutation called 'banta', which consists of five betel nuts and equal number of leaves wrapped in a banana leaf, is placed at the feet of the tree and a sacred prayer offered before cutting the tree.

Cheng performs two different and opposite roles – a) Arong a'cheng which is played without any reference to death, and the other - b) Karhi a'cheng, which is performed exclusively for the dead at a Chomangkan or funeral festival. Two types of rhythms are played at a funeral festival but the former can and is played at occasions such as welcoming of dignitaries etc. But it is considered a taboo to play Karhi a'cheng on occasions other than funeral festival. It is performed only in the host village where such a festival is performed.

Arong a'cheng performs a set of rhythms which are different from those performed for the dead. Ranges and depth in the funeral rhythms of Karhi a'cheng carry pathos and agony.

a. Chengpi – is a double-headed laced drum, made of a hollow or hollowed out trunk of Phang (Gmelina arborea) or similar other wood. The drum has a bigger head (amahang) and a smaller base (aling) with a slight bulge in the middle which gives the drum a conical profile. It is covered and tuned by laces 'joining the striking head to a ring around the much smaller head'. Cheng Kindar (stout bamboo stick, thicker at the head which slims towards the base) and Cheng Baiko/Beko (wooden chisel with broad head and sharply tapered base for tuning) are used to tune the drum. A cane stick carved at one end called Chengbe is used to hit the face and the rear is stroked by left hand to produce at least 7 (seven) basic sounds, such as— krong, klur, kret, klek, (front face) and chong, cherok and Dip (rear face). There are various interesting legends of the origin of Chengpi which is played by master drummer Duhuidi during funeral festivals called Chomangkan. A rhythm called 'kepalodok' is played to the accompaniment of 'Nimso Kerung' dance at the funeral festival. Drum is also played to welcome guests and dignitaries at important social occasions.

b. Chengso – is the smaller version of the Chengpi and its use is limited to accompanying its larger cousin. Its most important function however is at the funeral festival as a medium of communication with the spirits of the dead.

c. Chamburukso achengso - is a pair of tiny cymbals played by Uchepi, a designated female cook of the dead at a funeral festival, to the accompaniment of the rhythm of drum beats.

d. Cheng-burup – is a pair of wedge-laced drums shaped like inverted 'burup', a bamboo basket traditionally used for storing minor items of a Karbi household. The burup's cone-shaped body is carved out of wood which is the drumhead or sound box covered with goatskin or other animal hides. The drum is tuned by tightening a network of laces covering the lower body as it tapers. According to scholars, 'this type of head-fixing is not common in NE India, but it is widespread in island SE Asia and parts of Africa.' Cheng-burup is not played during funeral ceremonies. According to folklore, the youth dormitories made extensive use of the instrument as a means of communication and authority.

e. Cheng-kumbang – is a Karbi version of the 'struck idiochord tube-zither' common in South East Asian cultures. It is made from a single internode of a large sized bamboo with its outer skin lifted up and two small bridges inserted beneath the strings so as to prevent the strings striking the wall of the bamboo tube which serves as the resonator.

A piece of wood or bamboo is sliced to fit between the strings, which vibrate when hit by two small sticks to produce a sound. Cheng-kumbang is not played at funeral festivals but according to elders, this instrument is used at another version of funeral ritual called 'Tiso Chomangkan' which is performed rather arbitrarily without observing the usual religious procedures.

f. Cheng-langpong - is made of 'bamboo' (Langpong) with one node removed, which is played to amuse kids and does not have any ritual or religious purposes. The open end of the bamboo tube is covered with rodent skin.

g. Cheng Tumtum – it is so called because of the 'tum tum' sounds that this drum produces and is made of a long shell of a large size. Both ends of the 'tum tum' is covered with goat skin and laced by one piece of rope. It is a Karbi version of biconical drum 'where the drum swells in the middle and curves down towards the skin at either end.' It is played together with Cheng Phulè to produce a dance rhythm performed by unmarried boys and girls at traditional funeral festival. The player hangs the drum around his neck by a cord and beats both heads with palms.

h. Cheng Phulè -it is a laced single-headed conical drum and derives its name which resembles the shape of a pot or a bowl, Phulè, hollowed out from wood. It serves as the treble drum and pairs with Cheng Tumtum (bass) and the two instruments are played separately by two players to produce the funeral dance rhythm.

5. KUM - is the generic name given to string instruments or cordophone, which has two varieties —

a. Kumdengdong – is a two-stringed lute played by fingering on the two strings alternately to produce the 'deng-dong' sounds. The strings pass over a sound box made of coconut or wood across the lengthened neck or finger board from a string-holder at the base to the head. The strings made from the tough fibre of a plant called mengsuri (Sterculia villosa) is stretched from the pegs to the soundbox over a bridge, which is covered with goat skin. Scholars call this type of lute as 'quite different...where the body is a separate resonator made of coconut.'

b. Kum li'eng –is named so because the one stringed fiddle (or viol) played using a bow produces 'eng eng' sounds. The resonator is made from a gourd shell and resembles the typical spike-lute. The player rests the base of the instrument on the ground steadied by his left or right toe. The string is traditionally made of a strong fibre of mengsuri. It is a very versatile and creative instrument which gives an absolute ease and freedom to a folk artiste to play his mood.

According to a Karbi legend, a certain ancestor avenged the death of his younger brother by defeating the culprit, a magical wild entity, known as 'Tiso Jonding' (the Tall Tiso), in a duel of Kumli'eng.

6. CHIRIKDONG OR CHENG THAILOK - is a Karbi version of the raft-zither 'which has a small raised platform facing the performer' and the player supports the zither with two cords looped around the outer edge and sound is produced by striking at a 'set of short strings tensioned across the raised frame' and simultaneously slapping the back of the instrument in a regular percussive rhythm.' It is a percussion instrument of a unique kind which is played by a male to accompany a song.

7. TOROLIT – is a clay musical instrument of the Ocarina family, also known as 'vessel flute'. It is a simple device of enclosed chamber which bulges in the middle and tapers on both sides and can be held in a palm. There are two finger holes on both ends while the middle one is used for blowing the air in to produce the 'to-ro-lit' sound. Clay is dried or semi-burnt before shaping the instrument.

8. KLONGKLONG - is made of single bamboo internode sliced in the middle on each side and a small stick inserted in such a manner that any wind movements may produce 'klong klong' sounds to frighten away wild animals and birds from a jhum field.

9. PHALADAP - is a bamboo tube sliced lengthwise from both sides in the middle which can then make clapping sound/noise when its one end is hung from a bamboo pole tied to a post of a typical raised house in a jhum field. The clapping noise is produced when wind blows and scares away wild animals and birds securing the crops. The device is regarded as 'Rit Akarjong' or 'soul of a jhum field' as the sounds reverberate across the jhum field to keep the surrounding wilderness warm and wakeful even when there is no human presence.

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TURIYA HAIKONG MONGYAM: A Tai-Khamti Legacy

-Chow Tanseng Khangkeo

Music is a divine nectar for the human soul. It has the unique ability to touch human consciousness, emotions, and feelings—dissolving inertia and pain while reviving and invigorating life with joy, hope, and excitement. Among all the arts, music stands out as one of the most powerful, creating a harmonious balance of positive energies that uplift both the mind and soul. It finds its true expression through the seamless blend of songs, dance, and instruments.

Music is a soul to the universe, wings to the mind, flight to the imagination and li fe to everything.....
- Plato

For centuries, human artistic consciousness has infused civilization and culture with beauty and vitality, making music a life-giving force. This is why people have long practiced music and dance—not just as a source of fleeting pleasure, but as a realization of truth and beauty.

The practice of music is incomplete without the inclusion of musical instruments, one of its most essential components. Instruments enrich melodies and lyrics, giving them depth and completeness. It is difficult to imagine music without instruments—if music is the soul, then instruments are its blood and flesh, infusing it with life.

The rhythm and sub-rhythm of an instrument carry the melody to the sensitive heart of the listener. The role of instruments in shaping sound—the very essence of music—is undeniable, as they transform raw vibrations into expressive and meaningful artistry.

Folk instruments are created by the commoners, passed down through generations. Unlike classical instruments, they have no specific inventor; rather, they emerged from the hands of unknown ancestors who crafted them using naturally available materials such as wood, bamboo, clay, and metal. Over time, these instruments evolved through intelligence, creativity, and continuous innovation.

Many classical and high-pitched instruments likely originated as folk instruments in the past. Within folk traditions and human society, certain instruments gained widespread recognition due to extensive practice, promotion, and dedicated research and development. For example, Ustad Bismillah Khan transformed the shehnai (a type of oboe, a woodwind instrument) into a revered classical instrument. Similarly, Ustad Amjad Ali Khan once acknowledged with great respect the invaluable contribution of folk instruments to Indian classical music.

Folk instruments can be played by ordinary people, whereas classical instruments require skilled practitioners. Popular folk instruments of Assam like Taka, Sutuli, Nagera, Ektara, Dotara, Tokari, and Daba reflect various aspects of their natural origins and practical evolution.

The instinct to whistle during moments of joy, excitement, leisure, or rest—along with playing bamboo, bowls, lamps, tree leaves, bamboo leaves, pipes, reeds, and even using musical gestures for signals or expressions of love may have been the earliest steps in the invention of folk instruments.

Folk instruments are largely influenced by time and context. When emotions and excitement surge, they stimulate the urge to play music. Similarly, as the various moods and emotions of Navavarsha (the New Year) awaken, a sensitive mind naturally gravitates toward music.

This article aims to highlight the folk instruments of the Tai Khamtis, one of the minority ethnic groups of Assam. The Tai Khamtis, who lived in Myanmar for centuries were deeply influenced by its civilization and culture. They migrated to Assam in the mid-eighteenth century. Today, they reside in communities across Myanmar's Putao region and Shan Province, as well as in specific areas of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh in India.

The Buddhist Khamtis are known as a peaceful community. Their way of life is strongly shaped by Buddhist ethics while also being rich in folk cultural elements. Folk instruments play a significant role in enhancing their cultural and social life, adding vibrancy and depth to their traditions. Tai Khamti folk instruments can be categorized based on their practical use and structural composition.

From a functional perspective, instruments such as Kong Pat, Paiseng, Yamang, Keche, and Hoi Nam Panglai are traditionally played during religious and auspicious ceremonies. While other instruments like Kong Naleo, Kong Toi, Pee Son Chau, Pee Tok, Pee Kaap, PeeTut, Pe, Tingse, and Tingtro form a part of the Khamti folk life and are used commonly with folk songs.

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The structural composition-
based instruments can be classified as follows:

1. Leather instruments
Kong Pat, Kong Toi,Kong Naleo

2. Metal instruments
Yamang, Cheng, Keche

3. String instruments
Tingtro, Tingse

4. Wind instruments
Pee Tok, Pee Kaap, Pee Son Chau, Pee Tut, Pé, Hoi Nam Panglai, Pee Loung, Pee Soup Peit.

LEATHER INSTRUMENTS

1. KONGPAT

Kongpat, also known as **Bardhol**, is a distinctive musical instrument of the **Khamti community.** A typical Kongpat measures approximately 80–90 cm in length, with a mid-circumference of about 185 cm, a bottom circumference of 160–165 cm, and a diameter of around 52–55 cm.

The circumference of both drumheads ranges between 160 and 164 cm. It is traditionally crafted using cow or buffalo hide. Due to its size and weight,the Kongpat is not easily carried or played by a single person. Instead, two drummers carry the drum using a bamboo support placed in the middle. During processions, the main drummer joins in, walking alongside while playing the Khongkong (drum beater). In dance performances, both drummers stand face-to-face, either playing their own Khongkong or dancing while striking the drum with both hands. The drumming varies according to the occasion. For instance, the beats played during Ya Phra (idol displaypro-cession) and Ya Patesa (Kalpataru procession) are gentle and solemn while the rhythms played during Pyapung (drama performance) follow the nature and movements of the characters in the play. Despite the variation in characters, the Chatt and Cham (drum beats) maintain the slow and steady rhythm typical of Khamti performances. The Kongpat is an essential instrument in auspi-cious religious ceremonies, such as during the enshrinement of the Buddha idol in the Chong Sang Ken house or other such significant events. The powerful sound of the Kongpat can over-shadow many other folk instruments. The drum is played by members of royal and high-status families during wedding ceremonies to welcome the bride and groom.

2. KONGTOI

The Kongtoi closely resembles the Assamese Bihu drum and is primarily used in folk dance performances. Some scholars suggest that its shape is similar to that of a Madal or Mridanga. This instrument typically accompanies traditional dances such as Kakong Dhou Kai and Ka Naukyung.

Unlike larger drums, the Kongtoi can be easily played while being carried on the shoulder by a skilled drummer.

3. KONG NA LEO OR EMURIA DRUM:

It is a traditional instrument played among the Thai people of Thailand and the Tai people of Myanmar and Shan Province. While it is not commonly played by the Khamtis of Assam, it is an integral part of musical traditions among the Khamtis of Arunachal Pradesh. The Kongtoi is used in folk dance performances as well as processions, where it is played with a lighter rhythm, adding a subtle yet rhythmic accompaniment to the event.

METAL INSTRUMENTS

1. YAMANG (Borkanh)

Yamang is a significant musical instrument among the Khamti and Tai people. It is widely used by indigenous communities across Southeast Asia, particularly in Myanmar and Thailand, as well as by the Khamti people of Arunachal Pradesh. This brass instrument has a distinctive protruding middle section, which plays a crucial role in its sound production. As a percussion-like instrument, the Yamang produces its characteristic tone even with a slight touch on the raised part. Like the Kongpat, it is commonly played during religious and auspicious ceremonies. A typical Yamang measures 125 cm in circumference, with the raised portion having a circumference of 33–35 cm. The instrument's diameter is approximately 82–83 cm, while the inner section has a circumference of around 6 cm. It is believed that the Tai people of the Nanzhao (Nan-Chau) province in China originally invented this instrument, contributing to its rich cultural heritage.

2. KEWENG

The Keweng is an extended form of the Yamang. Like the Yamang, it features a large raised section in the middle, but it is distinguished by four to six smaller raised parts surrounding it.

3. CHENG

The Cheng, also known as Paicheng (rhythm instrument), is made from brass and bell metals. It comes in small, medium, and large sizes. Similar to other folk cultures, the Paicheng is played alongside Kong (drums), adding depth and rhythm to musical performances.

4. KECHE

The Keche is a flower-shaped brass bell instrument with a distinctive curved triangular shape. It is traditionally played to gather people or during significant religious events. It is commonly used when monks and religious leaders embark on ‘Tungsam’ (pilgrimage) or while offering Khautang Som (feast). The Keche is also played in religious processions, during the installation of Buddha statues, during monks’ meal ceremonies, and as part of death rituals. In some Viharas (monastic temples), spherical bells are used alongside these curved bells to enhance the ceremonial atmosphere.

STRING INSTRUMENTS

1. TINGSE

The Ting is a harp-like instrument, crafted with either one or two wires. These instruments are traditionally made from materials such as buffalo hide, monitor lizard skin, dried gourd shells, dried coconut shells, and Eri silk yarn. The Ting is played using fibers from the Tora plant or hair from a horsetail. It features two tone controllers, known as Thin and Ma. This instrument is commonly played alongside folk songs like Maukham Pali. According to tradition, on a full moon night in spring, a young man plays the soft melodies of the Tingse to charm his beloved.

2. TINTRO

The Tintro, also known as Ting Ta Lo, is a lute-like instrument. While it is crafted similarly to the Tingse, there are some differences. The Tintro is slightly larger than the Tingse and is typically made by attaching two or three strings to a wooden body.

WIND INSTRUMENTS

Khamti wind instruments include three types of flutes, Pepa or horn, Conch and Gogona. The three Khamti flutes are: Peetok, Pee Son Chou and Pee Kaap.

1. PEETOK

The Peetok belongs to the oboe family of instruments. Its most distinctive feature is its intricately crafted mouthpiece. The tongue of the flute, made of copper or silver, is designed to resemble the beak of a hornbill. This tongue is carefully crafted and attached at the knotted end of the flute. The knotless section of the flute contains six or seven equidistant holes—typically six on the top row and one on the bottom. To produce melodious waves, the player blows air at the tongue of the flute while moving their fingers up and down over the holes.

2. PEE SON CHAU

The Pee Son Chau is a flute of great cultural significance to the Khamti people. It is a heritage instrument of the Tai Khamti community and measures approximately 15 inches in length. An artificial division is created by attaching a nail to the mouthpiece of the flute, often integrated with paper. A lid, crafted from Nahar (Cobra's saffron) tree leaves, is placed above the nail and secured with thread to prevent it from being blown away by the wind. The flute is played by blowing air into the partitioned section, producing its distinctive sound.

3. PEE KAAP

The Pee Kaap flute shares some similarities with the Pee Son Chau. It is crafted by shaping the knotted end of a bamboo flute and integrating it with another, shorter and slightly wider flute. This unique combination likely gives the instrument its name, "Pee Kaap." The newly combined flute is played by blowing through the open end of the added section. The best material for making such flutes is Maithang bamboo, which is found in hilly regions and is highly valued for its quality.

4. PEE TUT

The Pee Tut, also known as the Tut Tut instrument, is a type of buffalo horn instrument. In earlier times, it was used as a signaling device during elephant hunts. Elephant trappers would blow the instrument to communicate with one another, relaying information about the location and movement of elephants. Although the Pee Tut is no longer in use—having been replaced by air guns—it once played an important role in various aspects of life. It was also used to summon people for gatherings and was traditionally played by farmers to invoke rain during droughts.

A Pee Tut found in the house of Gohainbari Pingna
has the following measurements:
Length (curved): 40 cm
Wide mouth circumference: 8.5 cm
Mid-section circumference: 17–18 cm
Small mouth circumference: 8.5 cm

5. HOI NAM PANGLAI (SEA CONCH)

The conch is traditionally played during auspicious occasions. It is placed in the Pangna Phra (God's altar) or Seing Pai Phra (house of worship). The Hoi Nam Panglai is commonly used during religious processions and the installation of Buddhist idols at the Sanken festival. Additionally, it is played to invoke rain during times of drought.

6. PÉ (GOGONA)

The Pé is the equivalent of the Assamese Gogona. It is similar to the Rajasthani Morsing and the Western Jew's Harp. This instrument is crafted from a piece of mature bamboo, measuring approximately 7 inches long, 0.5 inches wide, and 0.25 inches thick. The Khamti people also play various types of horns, such as the Nara Pepa and Buffalo Horn Pepa, as well as flutes like the Muruli, Baanhi, Pee Laung, and Pee Soup Peit. They choose thes instruments based on time, convenience, and personal interest.

Along with wealth, education, and health, a society or community also needs celebrations and joy as essential aspects of life. Perhaps this is why music, creativity, and the passion for them continue to thrive. The Khamtis have also made efforts to preserve their musical traditions, even though they have declined over time.

During various Khamti festivals such as Lu Phra and Lu Kongmu, wealthy families not only donate idols but also offer folk instruments like Yamang, Sesong, Keche, and others. Additionally, instruments such as Hoi Nam Panglai, Pé, and Ting are donated by hanging them on Patesa. Participation in Pung (religious dramas) is referred to as "loo sop loo seing" (singing). The Khamtis believe that donating folk instruments will bless them with beautiful voices and musical skills in their next life. Notably, except for a few noble families, instruments like Kongpat, Yamang, Paiseng, and Keche are primarily preserved in Buddhist monasteries. Some noble families also gift the Yamang during the Mangkala Chong (wedding) ceremony of their daughters.

The folk instruments of the Khamtis are either indigenous, similar to those of non-Khamti communities, or part of the Tai cultural heritage that originated from the Thai-Myanmar region. Well-known folk instruments not only enrich cultural traditions but also serve as symbols of ethnic identity. They often resonate with pure, earthy melodies and rhythms that reflect human emotions.

Given the similarities between some Khamti folk instruments and indigenous instruments elsewhere, cultural exchange can be fostered through training, idea-sharing, and workshops led by skilled individuals from larger cultural groups. This can contribute to a vibrant culture of harmony. Additionally, research, training, and conservation efforts focusing on Asian cultures can further enrich their own traditions by exploring similarities with instruments from Southeast Asia, Taiwan, and Mongolia. If the music of Khamti folk instruments can capture even the subtlest truths of human emotion, excitement, and sensation, its waves can resonate within the broader world of music. While global culture today is heavily influenced by Western traditions, there is a crucial need to train, preserve, and enhance these delicate yet meaningful musical traditions. Their preservation will be invaluable to human existence.

Translated from Assamese by:
Pujashri Bordoloi

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FOLK INSTRUMENT OF THE RABHAS: Decoding the Legend of 'Kaarha' Nala

Mukul Rabha

[Folk artist Mukul Rabha is the first to produce a modern Rabha music album. He has played a significant role in promoting the linguistic and artistic heritage of the indigenous Rabha community of Assam. He is the recipient of the Shilpi Award 2025 for his contributions to enriching Assam's cultural diversity and legacy. In addition, he has authored several books on Rabha folk culture and heritage.]

The tale behind the origin of Kaarha may be relegated to the realm of legends, but its roots are firmly planted in the cultural heritage and identity of a human community. Rationalists may argue that legends lack scientific evidence, but they often conceal underlying truths within the main narrative. From the primitive civilization of the human race to the pinnacle of modernity, researchers and thinkers have come to realise that the long journey of human evolution is replete with hidden elements waiting to unfold. For instance, how did the humans transition from caves and cavities to a complex social system that enabled them to set foot on the moon? To uncover such mysteries, researchers often employ legends as a tool, recognising that folk narratives can provide invaluable insights into the collective experiences, beliefs and values of a community.

This instrument called the 'Kaarha' is not a shin or a flute, but a type of flute that can harmoniously integrate tune and song.

The Rabha tribe of Northeast India with its unique and distinct sense of harmony in their folk songs has evolved over time. Initially, the Rabha people learned to sing by mimicking animal and bird sounds or through the manipulation of sound waves to express their emotions. However, over time, music was shaped by scientific advancements. A new musical instrument was introduced by the Rabhas that produced a unique sound, unlike any other. This instrument called the 'Kaarha' is not a shin or a flute, but a type of flute that can harmoniously integrate tune and song. Unlike modern flutes with holes, Kaarha does not have any holes but produces a powerful sound almost instantly. This remarkable folk instrument has garnered immense popularity with time, serving as a nostalgic catalyst for the entire Rabha community to reminisce about the bygone days.

THE LEGEND OF KAARHA

Swirgi is a fascinating imaginary world believed by the Rabhas to have been created by the divine Creator, Krimichung. In Swirgi, Krimichung is revered as a Devadhiraaz (the Supreme Lord) and serves as the leader of the Raj-Parishad (the divine court), which consists of 18 members.

One day, in the court of Swirgi, Krimichung Devraj proclaimed that human life was the most precious of all life forms in the world, worthy of unparalleled fulfilment. To enrich the human experience, Krimichung generously bestowed various resources as gifts upon humanity. However, to his utter dismay, despite his continuous efforts to elevate human existence, people continued to grapple with extreme range of emotions — from happiness to sorrow that words alone could not fully convey. To address this, Krimichung entrusted Sage Grimbudar, a senior deity, with the noble task of teaching humans to express their emotions through the universal language of music. Thus, music became an integral part of Swirgi's culture, deeply ingrained in the lives of its inhabitants. Through music, the people of Swirgi could convey their deepest emotions in ways that surpassed the limits of language.

To further fulfil the king's decrees, it was decided that the kingdom's most skilled singing deities would be sent into the human world, commencing the next day.

Before the said departure, Sage Grimbudar gathered the Devakumars (young divine male deities) and offered guidance. He reminded them that although the world was full of many beautiful and tempting attractions, they must never forget and deviate from their sacred purpose - to serve humanity through the transformative power of music. They were to live among humans, assume human form, and fulfil their duties as poets and musicians.

As a token of appreciation for their selfless service, the Devakumars were given silver. However, they were given a solemn warning: should they falter in their duties or forget their true mission, they would incur the wrath of the heavens, inviting divine curses upon themselves. The sage cautioned the Devakumars (young deities) with a dire prophecy:

"You will have no way back to heaven. Even on Earth, you will not remain human. You will be forced to assume another form and spend the rest of your days as a cursed existence."

With reverence and humility, they touched the master's feet and vowed with determination to fulfil their sacred duties.

Curse of the Devakumars:

At the appointed hour, the four Devakumars accompanied by other divine beings, descended from the celestial realm and assumed human forms upon setting foot on the Earth. With their newly acquired mortal senses, they marvelled at the breathtaking landscape around- the majestic mountains, serene rivers, lush trees and the diverse flora and fauna. Enchanted by the beauty surrounding them, they took in the sights of all four directions before setting off in search of humans.

Landing atop a towering mountain peak, the Devakumars were captivated by the symphony of rushing streams and cascading waterfalls. Drawn by the riveting sounds of Nature, they descended into a nearby village, where they rested for a while.

During their sojourn, the divine deities cautioned the villagers against cutting the bamboo that grew along the riverbanks. The dark, moss-covered rocks emerging from the flowing water resembling meditating sages in deep contemplation filled them with admiration. They listened to the birds singing from the treetops and joined in, harmonizing their voices with the gentle murmurs of the streams. Inspired by the serene beauty, they began composing verses about the land allowing their creativity to flow like the rivers they had grown to love.

During their sojourn, the divine deities cautioned the villagers against cutting the bamboo that grew along the riverbanks.

As time passed, the deities continued their search for people to fulfil their most important duties on Earth. Soon they chanced upon four young girls fetching water from the river, dressed in exquisite traditional attire and glittering jewellery. A wedding celebration was underway in a nearby village that fateful day. The Devakumars could not help but observe the girls with fascination.

As they gazed, their hearts skipped a beat with admiration. The radiant beauty, the curved body, blushing cheeks, and graceful presence of the maidens surpassed even the celestial splendour of the Devakumaris. The Devakumars, once devoted to their heavenly mission, now found themselves captivated by the charm of earthly women, their thoughts drifting away from the tasks they were assigned to.

As the girls continued to draw water from the river, the Devakumars, unable to resist, stepped forward, their hands reaching out in longing. But just as their fingertips were about to touch the girls, a deafening sound reverberated through the air. A divine force tore through their bodies, and, in an instant, they began to transform. The Devakumars' human forms dissolved. They merged into Nalban (Nalua), Bijuli Bamboo (Solua), Kakowa Bamboo (Julunga), and Water (Sulunga)—forever bound to the elements of Nature. The curse of heaven had been invoked, a consequence of disregarding the Sage's warning.

On the other hand, the startled girls gasped, quickly retreating from the river. Confused and frightened, they looked around, trying to comprehend the mysterious events unfolding before them. But soon, an enchanting tune filled the air—an ethereal melody that transcended all understanding. The divine music left them mesmerized, lingering in the wind, forever marking the moment of the Devakumars' fateful transformation.

Though the Devakumars were cursed and transformed into unrecognisable forms, they remained steadfast in their duties and clandestinely continued to teach music as ordained by the Sage. The harmonious tunes they created emanated from the very matter they had become, filling the air with a divine melody. Entranced, the girls who had gone to fetch water began to dance to the rhythm of the music, their hair flowing and sweat dripping from their faces. So absorbed were they in their dance that they forgot to fetch water for the wedding. As the sun began to set, their movements grew more fervent, the beat propelling them to dance without rest.

Meanwhile, as the wedding celebrations continued, the guests at the wedding grew worried on noticing that the girls were nowhere to be found. When they learned, the girls had gone to fetch water, they sent people to search for them. However, upon discovering the girls, they were surprised to see them dancing with an unbridled energy, their bodies drenched in sweat. When enquired about the happenings that led to such event, the girls remained silent, refusing to divulge any information.

And then something strange occurred—one by one from the search group began to move to the rhythm, eventually joining the girls in their frenzied dance. This strange phenomenon kept repeating, dragging each person who ventured to investigate about the girls, drawing them into an otherworldly allure. Soon, almost everyone from the wedding joined, leaving only the bride, the groom, and a few elderly men at the venue.

It wasn't until an elderly man stumbled upon the scene that the mystery began to unravel.

Birth of the KAARHA:

The elderly human was the only person not easily swayed by the mysterious tune that had bewitched everyone into an uncontrollable dance. He decided to analyse the situation with patience and wisdom.

Carefully observing, he noticed a quivering object called Nalban, which he identified as the root of the disturbance. Without hesitation, he severed the Nalban. The frenzied dancing gradually subsided, allowing the old man to gain deeper understanding of the situation. He then noticed a curved bamboo, a lightning bamboo, and a water body—all pulsing in unison with an unseen energy. With careful precision, he severed each one, breaking their hold on the people. The dance came to a complete halt.

When the old man questioned the villagers about the events that occurred, they recounted how they had been irresistibly drawn to a mesmerising sound compelling them to dance without control. With the ordeal over, everyone returned to the wedding, resuming the celebration.

A devout follower of the Sage's teachings, the old man sought to pay homage to the divine master. To honour the deity, arrangements were made for sacred rituals and worship. Following which the elderly man immersed himself in a deep meditation, thus attaining a divine realization. Enlightened, he now knew exactly what he needed to do.

With reverence, the old man took the nalban and chopped it to a length of seven to eight feet. He then crafted sticks from the lightning bamboo. He used these sticks to carve holes into the nalban. The bundle of sticks was pierced from one end to the other end. He then meticulously shaped the curved bamboo, securing a horn-like ribbon to the nalban's base. Finally, he rinsed the interior of the nalban with water, purging it of all impurities.

As the old man whispered the name of the revered saint at the tip of the nalban, a mesmerising melody filled the air, sending everyone around him in raptures. The sweet, lilting tune sparked joy, prompting some to dance and sing. Some even narrated stories and events. In that moment, the old man felt his emotions with a deep sense of contentment. He thought to himself, 'This is indeed a blessed day'.

The enchanting melody was none other than the 'Kaarha' Nala tune—a popular Rabha melody rooted in the cultural heritage of Assam's Rabha tribe. From that day forward, the Rabhas have used this melody to express a wide range of emotions - from mournful lamentations and sacred devotional hymns to jubilant celebrations and vibrant singing and dancing. By narrating events of the past, this timeless tune of the Rabhas has become a means of reminiscence and remembrance through storytelling.

If nurtured and developed further, there is no doubt that this captivating indigenous melody of the Rabha people will assume its rightful place as a significant part of the world of music.

Ruangmei Naga
Folk Music Instruments

FOLK, Vol: 1, Issue: 1, March 2025

Kadiguang Panmei

[Kadiguang Panmei is a Doctoral scholar at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. He is interested in studying the culture of Northeast India and its people from myriad perspectives—food, migration, geopolitics and the arts. He is also a music producer and makes music in his free time.]

The Ruangmei Naga people are one of several tribes of the Naga people that inhabit Northeast India. They are predominantly located in Tamenglong and Noney districtsof Manipur and have a rich tradition of folk music that encompasses wide themes surrounding their social and cultural lives. There are songs that deal with agricultural operations like lau phun lu (seed sowing song) and lau ruaih lu (weeding song), ritualistic songs like baanruh lu (feast of merit song), and stories and rhymes that are sung to children called nah lu (children's song). Although many folk songs were also sung without musical instruments, some such as majian lu (lamentation song), nrah lu (harp song), and lamluan lu (love song) always needed drums and harps.

One such classification is the Hornbostel-Sachs system where musical instruments are classified into the categories of aerophones (instruments where sound is generated through vibrations through air and not strings or membranes), chordophones (instruments where sound is generated through vibration of strings stretched between two fixed points), idiophones (instruments where sound is generated by the vibration of the instruments themselves rather than a string, membrane, or a column of air),membranophones (instruments where sound is produced by the vibration of a tightly stretched membrane) and electrophones (instruments that produce sounds through electrical means).

NRAH

Nrah is a stringed instrument, a chordophone, used by the Ruangmei people, akin to a violin. [1] It has a hollow body made out of a coconut shell that has beencleaned and cut in half and covered with animal skin, preferably that of a buffalo. The strings for the main body and the iron bow are made from horse's tail. The main body and its horsehair string are bowed and not plucked to generate sounds. The nrah has a separate removable component, a bridge made of wood to raise and support the strings to generate music.

Fig.1

Fig.2

Fig. 1.

An elder from Dailong village shows us the correct way to hold nrah. He was part of the **khangchiu** (men's dormitory) in his youth and converted to Christianity in 1980. He is 98 years old and one of the oldest surviving Ruangmei elders in Tamenglong (Courtesy: Lungkiang Giang Pamei)

Fig. 2.

The main body of nrah is made from coconut shell, wood and buffalo skin, especially skin from softer, more stretchable parts of the buffalo's body like the scrotum. The bow is made of iron and its strings from horse's tail and the bridge, only removable component, is made from wood (Courtesy: Namthiubuibou Daimei)

Nrah was mostly played by the Ruangmei men. Women rarely played it although not because they were forbidden from playing. Nrah with an almost melancholic yet peaceful sound was a part of various moods and occasions ranging from serenading the beloved to as an accompaniment for songs about love, loss and death. However, in present times, nrah is restricted to special occasions and is seldom used in community singing.

NKHUANGH

Fig. 3.

Nkhuangh made with metal wires instead of cane rope. The drumstick is made of wood and the beater is made from softer materials, in this case, rubber. The owner had replaced the cane ropes with metal wires for durability as cane ropes tend to loosen over time (Courtesy: R. Husuang)

Nkhuangh (drum) is the main percussion instrument classified as a membranophone, and is used during folk songs or ceremonies where the nkhuangh player plays it by beating the membrane with a stick.[2] It is the main accompanying bass and percussion instrument for folk songs and is mostly played in a straightforward 4/4 beat. The membrane of the drum is made from animal skin, especially that of the buffalo. Traditionally, nkhuangh was used during festivals and accompanied dances that were an integral part of Ruangmei celebrations. It is still a part of musical ceremonies and church festivals during Christmas. (Fig. 3, 4, 5 and 6)

Fig. 4.

Nkhuangh side view. Nkhuangh is the main membranophone instrument of the Ruangmei people. The membrane is made from buffalo skin; the skin is dried in the sun, soaked overnight and its hair follicles are cleaned so that the membrane of the drum is smooth and provides a good echo when hit (Courtesy: R. Husuang)

Fig. 5.

Nkhuangh, viewed from the top, placed alongside the tools required for its construction. The iron tools are required for carving and hollowing out the dense wood to give it a drum shape (Courtesy: R. Husuang)

Fig. 6. A traditional nkhuangh made with cane ropes. The drums in the olden times used same materials except for metal wires. Naturally available cane ropes were used to bind and hold the membranes of the drums together; however, they had to be rewired once in a while, especially for the nkhuanghs which were played regularly (Courtesy: Ramrisuang Pamei)

SYAMTUAIC

Syamtuaic (clash cymbal), an idiophonic instrument, is used during folk songs and celebrations. A pair of identical cymbals, syamtuaic is believed to have entered the Ruangmei Naga folk consciousness through external influence, especially the Kuki people.

SYANMIW

Syanmiw (nipple gong) is also an idiophonic instrument and is traditionally used during special occasions such as marriage, funeral and baanruh (feast of merit) to signal the start of an event. Back in the day, along with the guaichai (bullhorn), syanmiw may also have even been used to alert against hostile attacks from neighbouring villages. (Fig. 7)

Fig. 7. Syanmiw with a raised centre boss. It producesdifferent sounds depending on where it is struck (Courtesy: Kadiguang Panmei)

ALIM

Alim (flute), an aerophone, is the main woodwind instrument of the Ruangmei people. Anaerophone is an instrument in which sound is generated by vibrating air. Alim was mostly played by men of the society and was traditionally played at night before sleep. It is made from a bamboo stick and usually has four to six holes. It has an airy and mellow sound.

Fig. 8.

A work in progress, an unfinished alim. Alim is made from bamboo stick and is either an end blown or a side blown flute. It usually has four to six holes with regional variations (Courtesy: Ramrisuang Pamei)

Each different from the other in their making as well as use, the Ruangmei musical instruments have historically been a part of the folk music of the community. These instruments complement folk songs and dance, and are particularly important because these handcrafted wonders exhibit the ingenuity of the Ruangmeis who make the most out of available natural resources.

Notes
[1] Soundcloud.com, 'Nrah'; 'Nrah 1.' [2] Soundcloud.com, 'Nkhuang.'

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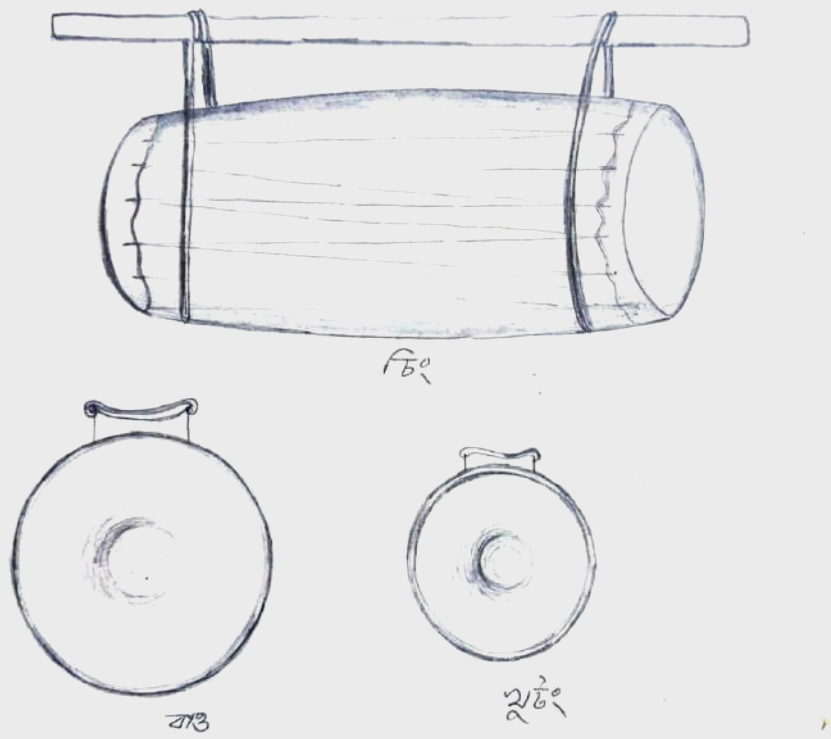
PRESERVING THE ‘SINGPHO’ WAY OF LIFE

Rajiv Ningkhi

An ethnic tribe living in the eastern region of India’s northeastern state of Assam, the Singphos are a pleasant and vibrant community with their way of life intertwined with Assam’s tea industry. Their traditions including songs, dances, and the unique way they play their folk instruments reflect the rich cultural heritage they proudly preserve.

BAO

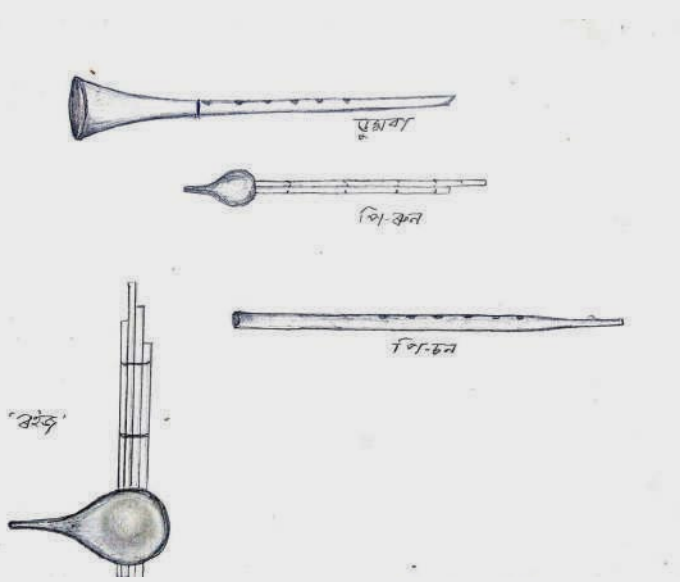
Also referred to as Barkanh, Bao made from a blend of various metals is one of the most significant instruments of the Singphos. For the tribe, Bao is more than just a musical instrument, it is integral to their social and cultural life. According to the Singpho way of life, Bao is traditionally played during the birth of a newborn in the tribe. Apart from that, it is also used as a means of alerting the village in times of danger. There is no practice of dowry in Singpho marriages. Instead, daughters are cherished and regarded as highly valued members of the community. During weddings, it is customary for the groom’s family to present gifts to the bride’s family. Among the offerings which may include money and other items, the Bao is considered the most significant and treasured gift.



There is a tradition of honouring the dead by playing a combination of three kanhs (bell-metal instruments of varying sizes). The tune creates a resonant, mournful harmony when played together. This sound echoes through the night filling it with a soulful melody. Accompanying these instruments, the 'jaiwas' sing songs that recount the life and legacy of the deceased. Which is why, Barkanh holds significant cultural value and is often preserved as an heirloom in Singpho households. The Barkanh is complemented by a smaller yet equally vital instrument — 'khutung' made from the same bell-metal alloy. Together, these instruments are played as part of community announcements, the 'pengchua' (a religious informer) use the khutung to signal messages across the hamlets. The barkanh or bao plays an important role in celebrations like the 'Swapong Yong Manao Poy', the main festival of the Singpho people. During this festival, large groups of men and women in Singpho traditional attire perform dances before the sacred 'Swadung' and seek blessings from 'Mathum Matha', the Supreme Father. To add to the vibrancy of this grand celebration, 10 to 12 barkanh or bao are played together, infusing the event with an electrifying energy.

CHING

A prominent musical instrument of the Singphos, the Ching is a large, resonant drum carved from the middle section of a sturdy tree trunk. Trees with broken tops are usually avoided for crafting these drums, as the integrity of the wood is crucial. Once the drum shell is carved, it is covered with animal skin. These drums are often over six feet long, their size determined by the dimensions of the tree. Jackfruit wood is considered ideal for crafting the Ching. Due to its substantial size, the drum cannot be carried on the shoulders. Instead, it is placed on a designated platform and played by two people, one on each side. The powerful rhythms of the Ching bring life to traditional community dances. The one-sided Thong drum of Singpho tribe is more compact and played on the shoulder. It has a distinctive shape, with the upper part being wider and the lower part tapering down. Played by hand rather than with sticks, the rhythm of the Thong makes Khongka dance of the Singphos more attractive. 'Supseng Taal' is played along with Ching Thong and Bao. The size of this taal (cymbals) is bigger than most usual taals.



FLUTE
The flute holds a cherished place among the folk instruments of the Singphos, with several varieties, including the Piman, Pison, and Thuren.

The Piman, a six-hole flute made from plain bamboo, is played by adjusting finger positions to produce melodious tunes. The Pison, commonly referred to as the Muruli, is widely used among the Singphos. The Thuren, however, stands out as a uniquely designed flute, featuring a single hole in the middle of its long body while both ends remain open. Sound is produced by covering or uncovering the central hole, using a refined and specialized playing technique.

Known for its sweet and captivating voice, the Thuren is traditionally played outdoors rather than indoors, in accordance with Singpho customs. The Singphos, primarily an agricultural tribe, believe the Thuren holds special powers. According to their traditions, the melodies of the Thuren drive away insects from crop fields, protecting the harvest. Furthermore, after long and tiring days of labor, its soothing tunes help rejuvenate and uplift the spirits of weary farmers.

DUMBAR
The Dumbar, a distinctive type of horn, differs from the ‘pepa’ (buffalo horn) traditionally used in Assam. The Singpho Dumbar is slightly longer and features six holes instead of four, allowing it to produce a broader range of tones that capture the essence of Singpho songs.

In addition to the Dumbar, Singpho musical repertoire also include the ‘Pi-Run’ and the ‘Roise.’ These instruments are crafted using gourd shells, with bamboo pipes attached to create their distinct sound. They are typically played in solitude, with the musician seated quietly in the jungle, surrounded by Nature’s symphony.

The ‘tongi’ house, a rest shelter for agricultural workers, served as an important venue for folk music, where melodies resonated through the quiet surroundings weaving a sense of community and connection.

PAO
The 'Pao' (also known as Gagana) is a unique folk instrument in Singpho society, entrancing listeners with its ability to complement the melody of Singpho folk songs.

DORO
The ‘Doro,’ a type of Veena (a harp-like instrument), holds important cultural significance in Singpho society. A prevalent saying among the Singphos, 'Gunsu na man goi Doro ganget' (playing the Veena in front of a cow) signifies the instrument’s revered status . Traditionally, these instruments are stored by hanging them on the wall near the fireplace, ready to be taken out when the occasion demands.

Translation:
Birina Goswami

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INSTRUMENTS OF TRADITION: **Crafting TIWA Folk Heritage**

Bidyut Bikash Senapati

One of the most vibrant indigenous tribes of India's Assam, the Tiwa people are indigenous to Upper Assam area with significant populations in Karbi Anglong, Nagaon, Morigaon, Kamrup, Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, and Tinsukia. Some Tiwa communities also reside in parts of the neighbouring states of Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh. Characterised by their distinct religion, language, culture and traditions, the Tiwa community in regions like Meghalaya, Karbi Anglong, Nagaon, Morigaon, and Kamrup represents a rich cultural identity. This article explores the fascinating world of Tiwa folk instruments, a unique cultural legacy of the community.

> *Music and its elements have evolved as an intrinsic part of the human experience, much like any other essential aspect of life.*

Since the earliest human existence, songs, musical instruments, dances, and rhythms have served as powerful artistic expressions of human emotions - laughter, sorrow, joy and have played integral roles in rituals, festivals, and ceremonies. While discussing the origin of musical instruments, B. Chaitanyadev, in his book 'Bharatiya Vadyajantra'(Indian Musical Instrument), expresses, "The first instrument of human society was the human body. During the ancient period humans used their bodies as percussive tools to create rhythm by clapping hands, stomping feet, and striking thighs or buttocks. Therefore, in the past, the human voice was called the "Gatra Veena" (Gatra: Voice, Veena: a harp like instrument) or "Deviveen" and all the other type of Veena (harp like instrument) was called the "Darbi Veena" meaning harp-like instrument made of wood."

So musical instruments can be broadly defined as any tool that is capable of producing melodic tunes from a simple object like stone or leaf to the advanced electronic devices of the modern era. Many of today's sophisticated instruments trace their origins to the seemingly primitive tools of ancient times. Across traditions, musical instruments have evolved to reflect the unique artistic and cultural expressions of indigenous communities. The Tiwa people, like many other tribes, have a rich tradition of folk instruments, each serving a distinct purpose. Beyond their role in creating music, these instruments hold deep cultural and ritualistic significance, playing an essential part in ceremonies, festivals, and daily life.

This write-up provides a comprehensive understanding of Indian musical instruments, covering their types, usage, crafting techniques, and playing styles. However, categorizing these instruments presents challenges due to their rich diversity and overlapping forms and functions. To structure this exploration, the classification system outlined in Bharata's Natya Shastra has been followed, ensuring a well-grounded approach. According to this system, Indian musical instruments are categorized into four groups: Tata Vadya (Stringed instruments, also known as chordophones); Sushira Vadya (Wind instruments, also known as aerophones); Avanaddha Vadya (Percussion instruments, also known as membranophones); Ghana Vadya (Solid instruments, also known as idiophones)

GHANA
VADYA (IDIOPHONES):

A. Thókthórok or Tongtoróng:

An Idiophone integral to Tiwa agricultural activities, it is commonly played while guarding paddy from a tongi (a high, covered platform used for watching over crops). The paddy keeper can carry this instrument on their shoulder while using it. It produces a distinctive thokthorok sound, serving as a deterrent to birds and animals that might damage the paddy fields. While its primary purpose is in the fields, there are no restrictions on playing this instrument in other settings.

We came upon the Thokthorok at the exhibition held during the Langkhon Festival on October 28, 2009, at Ulukunchi in Karbi Anglong. This instrument crafted using Hamilton's bamboo is knotted at both ends. To create the Thokthorok, a rectangular pit measuring three inches long and one inch wide is carved into one side of the bamboo shaft, positioned equidistantly between the two joints. A variation of this instrument was created by Ulukunchi village headman and skilled artist Yuwal Bor Amchong. His version differed slightly in its construction. In the 20-inch-long instrument, the bamboo was completely hollowed out between the knots, leaving only four inches intact on either end. Due to this modification, a central rectangular hole was no longer necessary. The instrument produced sound when struck with two small handheld beaters.

For practical use in paddy fields, a modified version of the Thokthorok has been developed, enabling it to be played without human intervention. To aid in understanding its function, diagrams have been used to illustrate the playing and preparation techniques. In this modified setup, a pair of bamboos is arranged in a structure similar to the original Thokthorok. These bamboos are balanced evenly on both sides without fully intersecting each other. Wickers are secured with a rope, tied in a bow, and attached at one end to a tree branch while the other end is anchored to the ground. The Salangfadi (a sieve-like object) hangs at the lower end near the ground. Additionally, a stick is tied to a string in such a way that when the it sways with the wind, it rhythmically strikes the perforated section of the Thokthorok, thus producing sound.

Notably, the Thokthorok is referred to as Moswa (male), while the Wafangkhram is called Muslung (female), symbolizing gender representation within this setup.

B. Wafangkhram:

The Wafangkhram is crafted from a segment of Hamilton's bamboo, with 2 to 3 inches left intact at both joints. The back part of the bamboo is partially shaved or removed, leaving a 2-inch-wide surface. To prepare the instrument, a half-inch square hole is carved at the centre of the upper back.

To ensure the two strings remain parallel to the hollow pit, small sticks are inserted at both ends, functioning like the bridges of musical instruments such as the tanpura. Positioned on top of the setup is a kudam—a flat piece of bamboo that secures the strings in place while covering the hollow opening. The instrument produces sound when the two string-like tamals (plant fibres extracted from bamboo) are struck with a small hammer. Traditionally, the Wafangkhram is played by shepherds to while away time and by elders while storing paddy.

C) Taal or Khayang:

This Tiwa folk instrument is primarily played by the Tiwa people of the plains. It is crafted from bell metal and traditionally accompanies the rhythm of the Patidhol and the Pepa (horn). The use of this instrument is distinctly visible in the widely celebrated Bihu songs of Assam. The instrument consists of a circular piece, typically 5 to 6 inches in diameter, with its central area crafted from glass, known as da. A small hole is made in the centre of each piece, allowing the pair to produce sound when struck together. The rhythmic chime of the taal resonates harmoniously with the beats, creating a vibrant and dynamic melody. The Tiwas of the plains also refer to this instrument as Khayang, in reference to the sounds it produces during performances.

D) Frog Voice-Emulating Instrument:

This instrument is created by digging a pit approximately six inches in diameter and eight inches deep. The pit is moistened with water and then completely covered with a sheath of betel nut. A hole is made in the centre of the sheath, through which one end of a cane stick (or hoggle) is inserted, while the other end is tied to a bamboo strip. To play the instrument, water is sprinkled on both the cane (hoggle) and the sheath. The player places both feet on the pit while rhythmically pulling and releasing the cane with their hands. This action produces a sound that mimics the croaking of frogs.
This unique sound-making technique, called Ural Tona, can also be performed using an ural (a wooden mortar). It is an integral part of Nakhasanga rituals in the Tiwa community, where people sing and dance to invoke rain.

PERCUSSION INSTRUMENTS:

Leather-covered instruments fall under this category. These instruments produce sound when the leather surface is struck, either with a stick or by hand. The Tiwa community uses a variety of percussion instruments, including the Patidhol, Tumding, Tokor, Khrambaro (or Bardhol), Khramludang, Khrampanthai, and Khramkhuzura.

A) Khramludang:

The Tiwa word Khram refers to dhol, meaning "drum" in Assamese, while ludang means "long." Hence, Khramludang translates to "long drum." In his book Indian Musical Instruments, author Chaitanyadev mentions similar long drums found in places like Mexico. In Kerala, drums are traditionally made by hollowing out date and coconut trees and applying leather to both ends. The Khramludang follows a similar construction method but is made from gamhar wood.

The Khramludang from Ulukunchi in Karbi Anglong measures three feet and five inches in length. Its larger head has a circumference of 39 inches, while the smaller head measures 26 inches. The drum's body is hollowed out from gamhar wood and covered on both ends with goat skin. These skins are tightly secured using cowhide leather straps called Boroti, which are adjusted through ten cavities. A Khundul (a small round bamboo piece) is placed at the open end to facilitate easy pulling of the Boroti, while Khangati (small bamboo wedges) ensure a firm grip on the leather.

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The Khramludang is played by hand and is an integral part of celebrations such as Yangli, Bansura, and Magravalir Khelsyawa, among others. The rhythmic beats—"Chak Ghumang Ghu Chak"—often accompany traditional dances like Chilakhunji Wanchyuwa Michawa or Pithaguri Khunda Nritya which roughly translates to the rice pounding dance. The Khramludang bears a resemblance to the Shankari Khol, though the two instruments are distinct.

B) Khrampanthai:

The Khrampanthai, also known as the "young drum," is much smaller and shorter than the Khramludang, though its construction is similar. The Khrampanthai found in the Dekasang of Ulukunchi measures twenty and a half inches in length. Its larger drumhead has a diameter of seventeen and a half inches, while the smaller drumhead measures half an inch. Both drumheads are made of goat skin, like the Khramludang, and cowhide is used for the drum's lacing.

The instrument is primarily crafted from bamboo and features only two holes—one for a finger at one end and another for sound. There are two varieties of Khrampanthai: One with two joints, commonly played during Thurang Phuja. Another featuring two cups paired together, with a hole near the blowing joint and another for the fingers at the opposite end of the untied section. This variety of Thurang is played during Chagra, the spring festival of the Tiwa people. The Magra Tiwas also play the Thurang during the months of Kati and Aghon (the 7th and 8th months of the Assamese calendar). The instrument has ten cavities. Though it is called Dekadhol, it is traditionally played not only by young men but also by other skilled musicians. It is often played in harmony with the Khramludang during the Wanchua festival of the Tiwas in Amkha.

Beyond ceremonial performances, the Khrampanthai is played during Panthai
Salwa (clearing vegetation in jhum cultivation), Fadarkasewa (soil-cutting), Micruwana (paddy sowing). The drum is struck with a stick on its larger face, while the smaller face is played by hand. In the month of Jeth (the 2nd month of the Assamese calendar), it is customary for the Khrampanthai to be first played in the personal yard of the chief called Lor ((priest and administrator) of the Marjong area during the paddy sowing ceremony. Only after this initial ritual performance does the Khrampanthai move to other villages under the Lor.

The Magravi Tiwa people play this drum during the month of Bohag (the 1st month of the Assamese calendar) as part of their cultural traditions.

The beats played on the Khrampanthai during the Panthailanga Misawa dance of Khaplangkunchi, a ceremonial dance symbolizing the ploughing of the ground for jhum cultivation sound something like:

Dum Dum Dum Dummang,
Dum Dum Dumang, Dum Dum...

C) Khramkhuzura:

The Khramkhuzura is shorter in length than the Khramludang but has a larger body and drum face compared to the Khrampanthai. The word khuzura means "short."
The drum shown to us by Chattrasing Dafang, village elderly from Morten in Karbi Anglong, measured sixteen inches in length. The larger drum face had a diameter of thirty-six inches, while the smaller face measured thirty-two inches. Like other khram drums, both faces are covered with goat skin. According to Dafang, the boroti (leather strip used for tightening the drum) was traditionally made from deer skin.

The drum has twelve cavities and features small rings, similar to those found on a dhol, which help tighten the boroti. The Khramkhuzura is played using a beater on the large drum face, while the smaller face is played by hand. However, during the Chagra festival, it is played exclusively by hand. Even, in Amkha's Phuja, it is played by hand without the use of a mari (beater).

This Tiwa folk drum is an integral part of traditional festivals and rituals such as Phuja, Chagra, Yangli, and Muinarikanthi. It is also played during significant community activities like Mairawa (paddy harvesting), Maifodola (threshing), and Phangsa (tree pulling). While cutting paddy, the beats played on the khram vary between the morning session and those played after lunch. In the Maifodola Misawa of Umpanai, the beats follow a characteristic pattern like:

Khramching, Khramching,
Khramching...

D) Khrambar:

The diameter of the Khrambar is larger than that of the Khramkhuzura, with its construction and usage among the Tiwas of Karbi Anglong being similar to that of the Khramkhuzura. Among the Tiwas of the plains, particularly in the Nagaon and Morigaon districts, this Bardhol is mostly played for public worship announcements or while welcoming dignitaries or during the sword dance performance at the Mela festival celebrated after Bohag Bihu.
According to historical records, the Bardhol at the house of royal officer Srirohin Bangthai of Barpujiya, measured 17.5 inches in length, with both its large and small faces having a diameter of 42.5 inches. The sizes of the Khramkhuzura and Khrambar are comparable to those of the Madal, a drum used by the tea-tribe community.

E) Doomding:

The Doomding is played during the Muinarikanthi festival of the Magra Tiwas. This instrument resembles the Mridangam. However, unlike the Mridangam, which has a mite (a black tuning patch) on its two drumheads, the Doomding lacks this feature.

While the other folk instruments as discussed above are made from wood like Gamhar, the Doomding is uniquely crafted using soil. It features two drum faces—one smaller and the other larger. In the book Tama-Subane Sonjuli, Mungsa Harsing Khalardev compares the shape of the Doomding to the nest of a common mynah bird.

F) Tagar:

The Tagar is the smallest percussion instrument used by the Tiwas and is played alongside the Doomding during the Muinarikanthi festival of the Magra Tiwas. It is considered a precursor to the Nagara, an instrument central to Neo-Vaishnavite culture.

Integral to the songs and dances of the Muinarikanthi celebrations, the Tagar is tied to the waist and played rhythmically to the chant of "Thankarang Thankarang." The Tagar shown to us by Chattraching Darfang of Morten village is a one-sided instrument made of wood, with a circular face measuring 22 inches in circumference. The lower end resembles the jagged edge of an egg but with a hole at the bottom. The instrument measures 6 inches in length from top to bottom.

Goat skin is used for the drum face, while deer skin is used for covering the body of the instrument.

G) Patidhol:

The Patidhol is one of the prominent instruments used by the Tiwas of the plains in ceremonies such as Bihu, weddings and Barat. While its length is similar to the Bihu Dhol of Upper Assam, the Patidhol differs in structure, playing technique, and preparation.

The drum played by Patidhulia Bharat Deori of Barpujiya area of Nagaon district, measures 19 inches in length, with a small face of 7.5 inches and a large face of 9 inches in diameter. Both faces are made of cow hide, though the larger face, which is played by hand, is best suited with the skin of an old goat. The small face, played with a 9-inch beater, also uses cow hide.

A Bihu rhythm played on this drum goes like:

Frang Frang Frang
Gror Frang Gas Frang Gas Ri Ri Ri Ri
Gro Hekeri Bedi Diagejau Jau Jau Jau
Gro Hekeri Bedi Diagejau Jau Jau Jau
Rigge Rige Rige Kheti Gas
Gas kheti Gas Jau Riger kheti Gas Jau Gas Jau Gas Ri Ri ri
Gas kheti Gas Jau Riger kheti Gas Jau Gas Jau Gas ri ri ri
Gas Reedau Regges Dau, Hekeri Bau, Hekeri Bau
Hekeri Bidan Khetin Dau Rige Rige Hekeri Bidan

Gas kheti Dau.

3. WIND INSTRUMENTS:

These are instruments that are played by blowing air through them, either using the mouth or with the aid of natural air flow. Examples of wind instruments used by the Tiwa people include Pangshi, Thurang, Thurlukh Shinga, Muhuri, Pepa, Komna, and Bhuibari.

A) Pangshi:
This instrument is crafted from a long strip of bamboo (Bambusa pallida). A piece of bamboo with two knots is cut to a length three to four fingers longer than the distance between the knots. A hole is made near one of the knots for blowing air, while six finger holes are placed at specific intervals on the opposite side, similar to a flute. Additionally, a uniquely crafted hole near one of the knots allows air to flow effectively through the instrument.
The Pangshi is played during occasions such as Chagra, Phuja, Yangli, Wansuwa, Fadarkase-wa, as well as in Dekasang during free time. Similar to the Thurang, another type of flute known as "Filili," "Philli," or “Phululu”, measuring about a meter in length—is found among the Nagas. This instrument is traditionally played by lovebirds at night in the Morong house to serenade their beloved, evoking the imagery of Krishna's flute.
Like the Nagas, the Tiwa tribe also doesn’t allow women to play the Pangshi.

B) Thurang:
The Thurang is a flute-like instrument with a unique structure, featuring two closed ends and made from bamboo (Teinostachyum dalloa). Unlike traditional flutes, it has only two holes—one for blowing air at one end and another for finger placement at the opposite end.
There are two variations of the Thurang. One single Thurang with two joints played during Phuja while the other a pair with a single joint but two holes- one near the blowing end and the other at the finger placement point is played during the Chagra spring festival of the Tiwas. The Magra clan of the tribe use the Thurang during the months of Kati and Aghon (the 7th and 8th months of the Assamese calendar) as part of their traditional festivities.

C) Thurlu:
The Thurlu is crafted from bamboo (Teinostachyum dalloa), specifically from a knot-free section, cut to the size of a medium flute. Two small holes are made at a distance of about two finger widths from the centre. Sound is produced by blowing through one end while using fingers to manipulate the holes in a distinctive style.
Playing the Thurlu is customary only during the Thurlu Puja, observed in the month of Aghon (November-December). This ritual is performed at Amsai Pinung and Bormarjang Pinung in Karbi Anglong. Apart from bamboo, small gourds, cobra saffron seeds, and paddy straws are also used in crafting Thurlu. A variation of the Thurlu, made from saffron cobra seeds, is called "Ludikil." Thurlus and Ludikils crafted from small gourds resemble the Sutuli, played by the male Bihu performers. Another version, known as Awa, is made from paddy straw and is played specifically during paddy harvesting. Herders also play the Thurlu while tending cattle.
In Marjong, the Khurasa of Samadi—young boys who have yet to fully learn the cultural and traditional teachings imparted in Dekasang are not allowed to play the Thurlu. There are also strict rules regarding participation in singing, dancing, and other activities when elders are present. Elders supervise these cultural practices to maintain discipline and uphold traditions.

D) Shinga:
The Shinga derives its name from the large horns of buffaloes. The inner marrow of the horn is carefully removed, the horn is thoroughly cleaned, and the tip is modified to make it suitable for playing. In B. Chaitanyadeva’s book, references are made to horn-based instruments resembling the Pepa (Assamese horn). Traditionally, these instruments were made from the horns of various animals, including cows, sheep, and goats. Similar horn instruments can be found across India, such as —Kahuk of the Maria tribe in Madhya Pradesh, Beliki of the Angami and Luthanga people, Chakala of the Chaotal, Bisan of Uttar Pradesh made from deer horns and buffalo horns like in Assam.
Among the hill Tiwas, buffalo horns are not used during worship, festivals, or dances. Instead, they are played at night while guarding paddy fields, in the morning before heading out for work and in the afternoon upon returning from the fields. When the horn stops playing in the morning, it marks the start of the day's labor. When it is played again in the afternoon, it signals the end of the workday. Some refer to this instrument as "Tutulit," while others call it "Tulit."

F) Pepa:
A hornpipe musical instrument, the Pepa is crafted by the Tiwas of the plains by hollowing out the marrow from the horns of a medium- or small-sized buffalo. A bamboo tube, measuring six-and-a-half inches in length and featuring six finger holes, is attached to the horn.
At the other end, a one-and-a-half-inch tap, with its knot cracked to form a cover, is fitted. A small, two-inch bamboo flute, tightened like a cap, is placed at the mouth of the adjoining tube to secure it. The instrument is played by blowing through the open end of the horn using the lips.A notable distinction between the Tiwa Pepa and the Assamese Bihu Pepa is the number of finger holes. While the Tiwa Pepa always has six holes, the Bihu version typically has only three. The Tiwas play the Pepa to accompany dance and song performances during festivals such as Magh Bihu, Bohag Bihu, and Barat.

G) Bhuimari:
The Bhuimari is a musical instrument played during the Nakkhasanga (invoking rain) songs and dances of the Tiwas. It consists of a one-inch-wide, six-inch-long piece of bamboo, measuring one millimeter thick. This bamboo piece is tied to a one-meter-long sturdy thread, which is attached to a pole at one end. The other end of the thread is fastened to the bamboo piece.

To produce sound, the thread is twisted vigorously with one hand, causing the bamboo piece to spin rapidly in the air. This motion creates a resonating "Bhun Bhun" sound, giving th instrument its name Bhuimari.

H) Komna:
The Komna closely resembles the Gogona, an instrument played by Bihu dancers in Assam. Typically, seven to eight centimetres long, it is also similar to the Mursing or Morsang, a traditional instrument popular in the Braj region of Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan. The Mursing is also used in the classical music traditions of the Deccan. Unlike other instruments, the Tiwa Komna is not used during festivals. However, at other times it is played without restrictions. Some play the Komna during the paddy sowing season, while others use it during the harvesting season. It is believed that the sound of the Komna, particularly crafted from wind-split bamboo is melodious. The instrument is played by coordinating mouth movements, rhythmic blinking, and controlled breathing techniques, making it a unique and skilled form of musical expression in Tiwa culture.

closely resembles the Sarangi and the violin commonly used in Indian music. The Sarangkat is crafted from wood, deer or monitor lizard skin, and materials such as eri yarn (a type of silk found in Northeast India, also known as Ahimsa silk) or zari. It is played using a bamboo bow or a bow with a string.

4. STRING INSTRUMENTS:
Instruments that are played by striking or plucking a string are classified as string instruments or Tattvadya. The Tiwas have several such instruments, including the Thógari, Sarankat, Zanthor, and Bongbong.

A) Thógari:
The Thógari is a string instrument measuring about three feet in length, crafted from gamhar wood. Its main body tapers gradually from one end to the other, resembling the shape of a drum beater. At the centre of the instrument, there are nine wooden poles, known as Punthu, similar to the wooden pieces used in a tabla. These nine poles correspond to the nine rungs of the ladder used in Shámadi and are meant to be pressed or struck with fingers.
Near the larger end of the Thógari, just beyond the finger pole, a wooden spike is placed. Skillfully attached to this spike is a dried gourd shell (Laokhura in the local dialect), which serves as a resonating chamber. This gourd shell is positioned opposite the finger pole. The tone of the Thógari is controlled by tightening or loosening the string attached to the spike, and sound is produced by striking the string with a finger. While playing, the gourd shell is positioned towards the head or shoulder. The Thógari shares structural similarities with the Tuila of Odisha and resembles instruments found in other communities.
Unlike other instruments, the Thógari is not played during special festivals. Instead, it is often played by Tiwa youth in Dekasang or traditional youth dormitories, where they sing songs for their beloved. Occasionally, it is also played near areas where paddy is stored.

B) Sarangkat: Much like the Kingri of the Gond tribes of Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Andhra Pradesh, and the Charindaof the Bodo people, the Sarangkat is a folk instrument that closely resembles the Sarangi and the violin commonly used in Indian music. The Sarangkat is crafted from wood, deer or monitor lizard skin, and materials such as eri yarn (a type of silk found in Northeast India, also known as Ahimsa silk) or zari. It is played using a bamboo bow or a bow with a string.
The Sarangkat is typically made from a wooden piece measuring 2 to 3 feet in length and 3 to 4 feet in girth. The wood is evenly shaped, and a pit is carved into the middle section. The lower part of the pit, which resembles a duck egg, is covered with monitor lizard or deer skin to enhance resonance. Small holes are pricked into the skin for better sound projection. he upper part of the pit is shaped like bird wings and is cut like a bar, which is played with the fingers, much like a mandolin or guitar. At the opposite end, a patch is placed to secure the wire that holds the strings in place.
The tone of the Sarangkat is adjusted by tightening or loosening the strings, which rest on a brace positioned over the skin to keep them parallel to the instrument. The strings, typically made from eri yarn, produce melodies when rubbed with the bow, which is crafted from cobra saffron wood or pine wood. Some variations of the Sarangkat feature three, four, or even six strings. The Sarangkat is played with the lower part of the pit facing downwards and the opposite end resting near the shoulder. A rich sound is produced when the bow is drawn across the strings.
Unlike other traditional instruments, the Sarangkat is not used in religious rituals or festivals. Instead, it is primarily played to accompany love songs and can be played at any time. It is frequently played in open spaces or near paddy storage areas.

C) Zenthor:
This folk instrument resembles a miniature version of a spinning wheel used in a loom. The materials used in crafting the instrument include bamboo, wood, cane, and a special tree resin found in the the mountains. This tree, is the Zenthor tree and hence the instrument is called the Zenthor! During the Wanshua festival of the Tiwas, young men carry the Zenthor while singing love songs to express their feelings and emotions to their beloved.

D) Bongbong:
The Bongbong is a traditional musical instrument commonly used by the Tiwas of Kathiatoli in Nagaon district. It is crafted by hollowing out a gourd and cutting it along the centre from top to bottom, with holes made at both ends. The gourd is then fastened with yarn, which runs vertically through three carefully cut sections. To complete the instrument, bridge-like sticks, similar to those found on guitars, are inserted beneath the yarn on both sides. The sound is produced by striking the wire with pumpkin seeds, creating a distinct rhythmic tone.

Translation:
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IN TUNE WITH GARO FOLK BEATS

STIVE ZANDHY R MARAK

The Garos identify themselves as the A·chik or Mandi tribe. According to their oral tradition, they migrated from Tibet to India, following the tributaries of the mighty Brahmaputra River. They initially settled in various locations before dispersing into different regions of Northeast India and adjoining areas. Today, Garo settlements are primarily found in the hilly regions of Northeast India and the Greater Mymensingh region of Bangladesh. In India, significant Garo populations reside in the western part of Meghalaya, as well as in Goalpara, Karbi Anglong, Kokrajhar, and Kamrup districts of Assam. The tribe also has settlements in Nagaland and Tripura, where they have lived since ancient times.

As a result of their geographical dispersal, variations in the Garo language have developed over time. Sir George Abraham Grierson classified the Garo language into eleven dialects: Am·beng (A·beng), A·we, Atong, Chibok, Chisak, Dual, Gara-Ganching, Matchi, Matabeng, Me·gam, and Ruga. Despite these linguistic differences, the dialects are mutually intelligible, allowing Garos to understand one another. In the 1870s, when American Baptist missionaries arrived in the Garo Hills, the A·we dialect was recognized as the literary language for reading and writing. This formalization was further reinforced around the year 1902.

Like most other tribes expressing their culture, customs, and traditions through various rituals, celebrations, and festivals, the Garo tribe also has its own unique festival known as Wangala.

In the present day, the Wangala festival is observed in two distinct ways: the first is the traditional Wangala, celebrated by the indigenous Garo community, known as the 'Songsarek,' who follow their ancestral faith and customs. The second is a more inclusive celebration observed by all sections of the tribe, including both Christians and non-Christian followers of the indigenous Songsarek faith.

Wangala is primarily a harvest festival, celebrated after the completion of all harvesting-related tasks, such as gathering produce in storage houses (Jam), stocking seeds for the next cultivation cycle, and setting aside grains for funeral rites in case of any deaths in the family. The festival serves as a thanksgiving ceremony to Misi Saljong, the deity of fertility and harvest. According to oral narratives, when rice seeds were first blessed to Ae Segri Doti Pagri, Misi Saljong instructed them to offer rice beer and incense and to organize Wangala after every annual harvest without fail. The first Wangala ceremony was performed in the underworld by Me·enma Drongma, a sea serpent king. Later, Munepa Sanepa, the Nokma (chief) of the human world, initiated the tradition on land. Since then, the Songsarek (followers of the indigenous faith) have continued to observe the ritual in its original form.

Another festival aimed at preserving the tradition and cultural heritage of the Garo tribe is the Hundred Drums **Wangala Festival**. This festival was first organized in December 1976 at Asanang, Rongram C & RD Block, West Garo Hills, Meghalaya, allowing people from all sections of society to participate. In November 2022, the venue was shifted to Chibragre, West Garo Hills, Meghalaya.

Wangala is typically celebrated in October, following the harvest. The Nokma or village headman hosts the festival, inviting fellow villagers and guests to join in the festivities.

GARO FOLK INSTRUMENTS

Music is universal in nature and serves as a powerful form of expression. Around the world, different cultures have their own unique styles of music that reflect their traditions and identities. In folklore studies, music falls under Material Culture, as it helps us understand a particular folk group through the materials they use. In this context, the Garo tribe's tradition of making and using musical instruments provides insight into their rich cultural heritage.

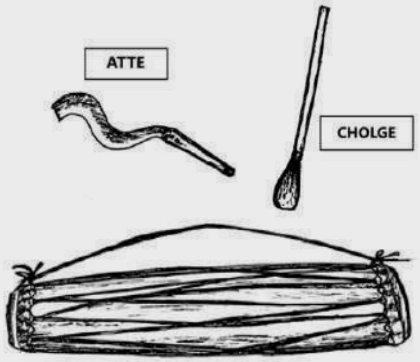
Like many cultures worldwide, the Garo tribe has its own distinct musical traditions, both folk and modern, which are integral to their festivals, celebrations, rituals, and recreational activities. Music plays a significant role in Garo life, especially during Wangala, a festival of dance, song, and merrymaking.

No music can exist without instruments, and the Garos use a variety of traditional musical instruments during Wangala, ceremonies, and daily life for ritualistic, recreational, and entertainment purposes. During Wangala, the rhythmic beats of these instruments guide the dance performances. The traditional Garo musical instruments include elongated wooden drums, gongs, trumpets, flutes, cymbals, and harmoniums. These instruments are crafted by the Garos themselves, using their unique traditional techniques and naturally available materials.

Garo musical instruments can be categorized based on their type, materials, and purpose within the tribe's cultural and social practices.

DAMA

There are different types of dama or drums which are made from wood and animal hides by using simple hand tools such as Atte (Dao), Cholge (long handle chisel) and Rua (an axe).



One distinctive feature of this drum is that the circumference of one end is slightly larger than the other. It is an essential instrument for the Wangala dance and various ritualistic ceremonies, such as: 'Mang so·a'(Funeral rites), 'Mangona' (Last rites) , 'Nokdonggaa' (New house inauguration), 'Marang rikgala' (Purification ceremony).

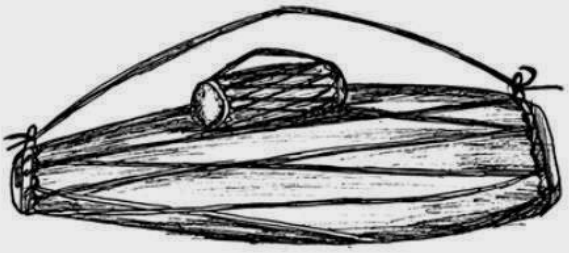
During the Wangala dance, different drumbeats correspond to different steps. Some of the most common rhythms are:

1. *"Deng dadeng dimita nomil ja·teng rimita,"*
2. *"Dimbangbang dimbangbang a·baoni wa' ja·pang,"*
3. A simpler beat: *"Grong grong grong grong."*

The lead drummer sets the rhythm by playing distinct beats, while the other drummers follow by maintaining the timing. The size of the drum varies slightly depending on the region. For example, drums from Siju, South Garo Hills tend to be broader, while those from West Garo Hills are usually slimmer. The design and regional variations of these drums are reflected in their names: Am·beng Dama, (Am·beng region), Ruga and Chibok Dama, Chisak Dama, Atong Dama, Gara-Ganching Dama, Dual-Matchi Dama.

KRAM AND NATIK

The process of making this drum is the same as that of 'Dama' (the traditional Garo drum). It is primarily used in ritualistic performances, such as: Funerals, Last rites (Mangona), Purification ceremonies (Marang rikgala) and Wangala festival.



During Wangala, the Kram drum is played by the drummer to maintain the rhythm. It is always kept in a sacred place within the house and cannot be touched randomly. If someone disrespects this rule and touches the drum without permission, it is believed that the house deity will curse them immediately, sometimes even causing death.

To prevent such misfortune, before placing the drum in its sacred space or using it in rituals, an egg is offered, and a prayer is recited to honour the deity.

NAGRA

This drum is similar to the Indian musical instrument *'Nagara'* and is used on both auspicious and non-auspicious occasions, such as announcements, ritualistic prayers, and other ceremonies. In ancient times, the Nagara could not be used randomly. It was believed that the Nokma (village chief) had to offer rice beer before playing the instrument. If rice beer was unavailable, the Nokma would sometimes have to borrow it to ensure the ritual was properly observed.

The *Nagara* is a large, conical-shaped drum made from wood, with animal hide stretched over one side to serve as the drumhead. It is played using two sticks and is kept in an upright position.
The rhythmic beat of the Nagara is traditionally transcribed as: "Dimdim oko dim."

ADIL AND SINGGA

*The Garo tribe uses two types of trumpets, locally known as **'Adil'** and **'Singga'**.*

Adil is made from a buffalo horn, with the tip cut off to create a hole. A bamboo pipe is then attached to extend the instrument. In modern times, rubber pipes are sometimes used instead of bamboo, as they offer greater flexibility and ease of maintenance.

The origin of Adil is described in traditional oral literature. According to mythology, A·ning-Bok-jare-Chining-Dimjare advised Saminja Rabongga to observe the Taro stem as a model for designing the instrument. During the Wangala dance performance, male artists play a single-note melody transcribed as: "Illuru illuru illuru,"which is synchronized with the drumbeats.

On the other hand, Singga is also made from buffalo horn but without any attachments. It is primarily used for announcements, war proclamations, and Wangala celebrations.

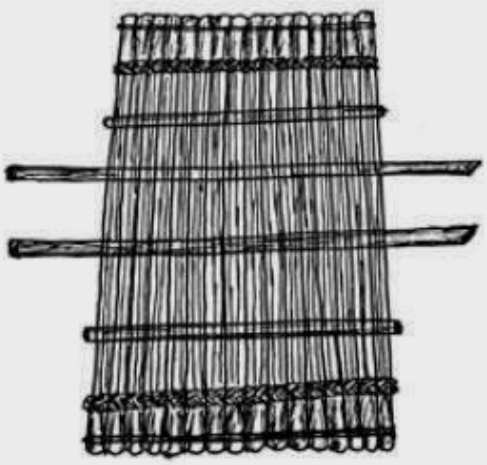
BANGSI

In the Garo language, the flute is generally called "Bangsi." There are several varieties of traditionally designed flutes, each unique in its own way. Some of the most common types include Otekra, Dakok (Daku), Olongma, Bangsi Rori, Illep, Imbinggi, and Wa·pek. Additionally, there are other types of flutes used for recreation and leisure.

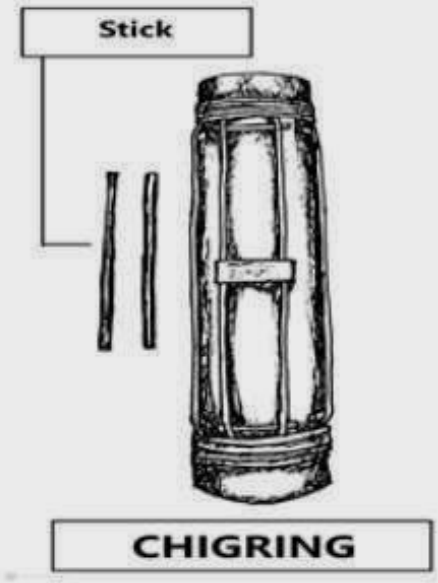
According to oral literature, the art of flute-making originated from observing the sound of the wind blowing through bamboo with naturally formed holes, often created by wasps or other natural phenomena. Because of this, authentic Garo flutes typically have fewer holes, with a maximum of three, which is fewer than many other flutes. Some flutes, such as Illep and Imbinggi, do not have holes at all but instead feature a slit for sound production. Otekra has only three holes and plays traditional tunes such as Nokjangchio ring·ani, Gure roa, Sara roa, Dama dadia, and Nokpanteoni chame nigama. Dakok (Daku) is slightly larger and longer than Otekra, with only two holes, and plays the same tunes as Otekra. Due to their limited number of holes, both Otekra and Dakok can only play specific Wangala tunes, such as Ajea, Doroa, Dani, Dokru sua, and Chambil moa. They are traditionally crafted from Wa·ge bamboo. Wa·pek is the smallest flute, slightly larger in diameter than Imbinggi. Similar to Illep and Imbinggi, it is made from fresh bamboo, as dried bamboo does not produce sound. Illep, Imbinggi, and Wa·pek do not have holes but instead feature a slit that acts as a reed. The tools used in making flutes include Atte (a carving tool) and Silengsi (an iron rod used to make holes). The Silengsi is heated over a fire to burn holes into the bamboo for tuning. Bangsi Rori, also known as the common flute, can play a variety of notes and is used during Wangala and other cultural programs.

DIMCHRANG OR KIMJIM

It is a zither percussion musical instrument made from mature cane, locally known as “So·ka gitchak” or Red Cane. A bundle of around 25 to 26 uniformly sized sticks is arranged flat, resembling a harp. Each stick is woven together using cane rope at the top and bottom, with bamboo spacers to lift the strings evenly. On one side, the outer skin of every cane stick is stripped into strings, while on the other side, three sticks are stripped to create three strings. The tools used for making this instrument include the Atte (Dao) and a chisel. When played, the artist strums the strings with fingers on one side, similar to playing a guitar, while the other hand uses the palm on the opposite side to create rhythm. The tune produced is transcribed as “Dimchrang dimchrang chrang chrang dimchrang.” This instrument is played as an accompaniment during singing performances like Cherasola, recitations like Aje-Doroa, and rituals such as Mangona or Chugan, a post-funeral ceremony.



CHIGRING

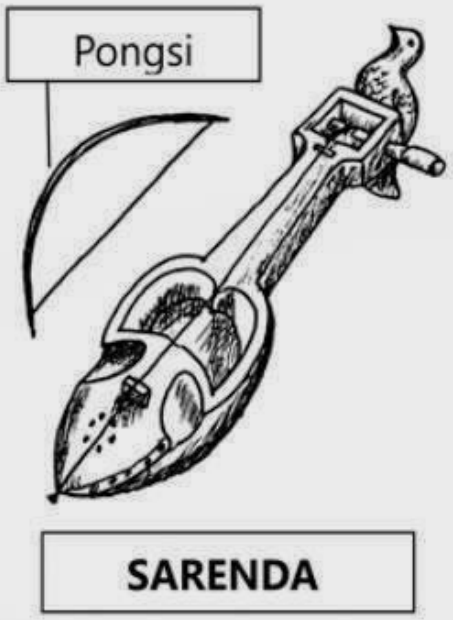


It is a versatile tube zither percussion instrument made from Wa·ge, a bamboo variety found in Garo Hills. The instrument is played by striking the tubular zither with two bamboo sticks or one stick, producing a sound similar to but softer than Dama. According to the oral narratives of the tribe, before the Dama (drum) was created, Chigring was used, which later inspired the making of the Dama. Its softer sound serves as an accompaniment for dancing, singing traditional songs, and storytelling, including Serejing ring·a, Sonajing ring·a, Ohomai ring·a, Harara ring·a, Nanggorere Goserong ring·a, as well as modern folk and popular songs. The same drumbeat patterns of the Dama are used to create music with Chigring, but some commonly played tunes are transcribed as “Jongnang gita gipengpang pang, Jongnang gita gipengpang pang” and “Pante dongja ka·dingja, Chipu dongja sudingja.” The instrument is crafted from a single bamboo cylinder, with six strings stripped from its outer skin, three on each side. A spacer is fixed in the middle, connecting one string from each side. The tools used in its making include Atte (Dao) and a chisel. Additionally, two flat pieces are attached, one on the top and one on the bottom, and a cane string is tied at both ends to hold the structure together. Even today, this instrument continues to be played by both young and adult men and women during various festivals and programs.

DOTDRONG AND DUITARA

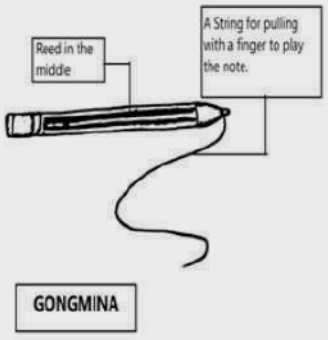
Dotdrong and Duitara (Dotara in Bengali) are versatile string instruments crafted by Garo artisans using teak wood, locally known as Gambare, and animal leather. The Dotdrong has a semi-half gourd-shaped body with frets attached for holding different keynotes and playing various musical combinations. In contrast, the Duitara is slimmer in size compared to the Dotdrong. The artisans use Atte (Dao) and a chisel to hollow out the body of the instrument, which is then covered with animal hide, leaving the inside hollow to enhance resonance. Both instruments have four strings tied for playing and are played similarly to a modern-day guitar, either by strumming with fingers or using a pick. They are commonly used as an accompaniment to traditional songs and narratives such as Harara ring·a, Serejing ring·a,and Nanggorere Goserong ring·a, performed during various occasions and recreational activities for entertainment. These instruments are played by both young and adult men and women, showcasing their undeniable cultural significance in Garo music and celebrations programs.

SARENDA



It is a stringed instrument similar to a violin, crafted from teak wood. It has a single string and is played with a bow to create a traditional symphonic sound. The string is made from the 'Kilkra' or 'Sawe' tree (Caryota Urens / Fishtail Palm). The instrument, also known as Sarenda, is approximately one and a half feet long. Above the flat surface and string tuner, a beautifully carved figurine of a bird is artistically designed. The lower part of the instrument is scooped out, with a portion covered with animal hide, while a small section above remains hollow to enhance sound resonance. Both boys and girls can play this instrument, often accompanying the narration of traditional songs and poems such as Ajea-Doroa, Katta Bima Agana, Ku·rama Sala, Kore Doka, Serejing, Ahama, and Lullabies. It is commonly played during evening hours for entertainment, expressing emotions to loved ones, lullabies, lamentations, and even during the Wangala festival

GONGMINA AND MATJONG



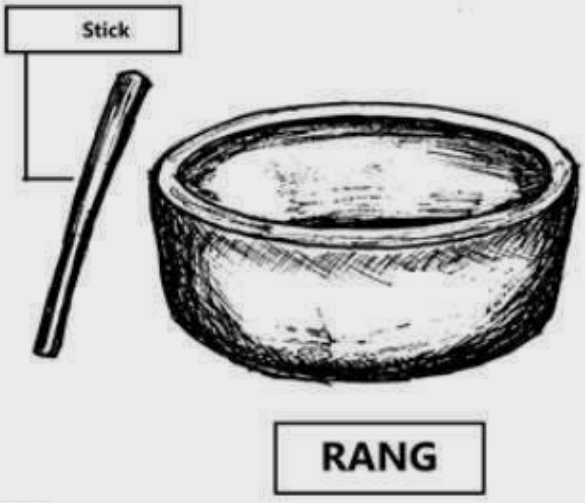
Gongmina and Matjong are Jew's harp musical instruments made from bamboo and iron, respectively. The common tune played by artists can be transcribed as "Gong ge·gong wa·gegong ge·gong", while another tune sounds like "Gonggi gongdang re·bada, Noksam nokgil gita re·bada." These
instruments are traditionally played during Wangala, for recreation or leisure time, and even during jhum cultivation by both young and adult men and women.

Gongmina, made from bamboo, is approximately 10 centimetres long. A thread is tied at the edge of the reed, allowing the artist to pull it while holding the instrument in their mouth to produce tunes. Matjong, on the other hand, is made from iron and is slightly shorter than Gongmina. It is played in a similar way, held in the mouth, with the reed flicked using a finger to create sound. Matjong is also attached to a bamboo holder designed with traditional motifs.

Gongmina, which is also used by the Assamese during the Bihu festival (where it is known as Gogona), is crafted from mature bamboo like Wa·ge, using simple tools such as an Atte (Dao) or small knife. Matjong, however, is forged by experienced blacksmiths from iron. Despite their material differences, both instruments are played in the same manner and produce similar melodic tunes.

RANG

Rang, commonly known as a gong, is made from raw iron ore and brass. It is used as a musical instrument in various rituals, ceremonies, and festivals, played by striking it with a stick. There are two types of gongs—one considered sacred and auspicious, and the other used as a musical instrument.



The first type of gong is not used as a musical instrument but holds deep ritualistic significance. It is played during rituals such as headhunting ceremonies, funeral rites, and purification rituals. For example, during funerals, the sister of the deceased uses this gong while ritually washing the body before carrying it to her house, symbolizing the deceased's rebirth within the family. In ancient times, these gongs were even used as currency for bartering. Made from pure iron ore without mixing other metals, they are quite brittle and can easily break when struck. Due to their sacred nature, they are not openly spoken about and are instead given secret names such as 'Rangdokgija' or 'Niknanggija'. Some of these ritualistic gongs include Gore-Rangmatchi, Gore-Chinara, Gore-Ginchi, Gore-Mandesni, Gore-Ganti, and Rang-Rawengkong.

The second type of gong, made from brass mixed with iron, is used solely as a musical instrument. These gongs are commonly played during festivals and celebrations and include varieties such as Kakwa, Nanggilsi, Guridomik, Kamaljakmora, Rangkilding, Rangbong, and Nogri. Unfortunately, the art of making these gongs has been lost to history, as no one has inherited the knowledge or skills to craft them. Furthermore, oral narratives of the Garo tribe do not contain any mention of the traditional process of making these gongs.

BAJONA

Bajona, or Harmonium, is commonly played during the Wangala dance festival. However, this musical instrument is not traditionally made by the Garos but was instead adopted over time. The exact period of its introduction remains uncertain, but it is believed to have been incorporated during the Zamindari period or the pre-British era. During the Wangala dance, musicians use the harmonium to tune into various traditional songs, such as Nanggorere Goserong, Serejing, Harara Ring·an, and many others.

KAKWA OR CHOPCHENG

Kakwa, commonly known as Chopcheng,
is a cymbal and a handheld musical instrument made from brass. It consists of two pairs, each held in both hands, with a string tied to secure the grip. The artist accompanies the music or song by clapping the instrument together, producing resonant and rhythmic sounds that enhance the performance.

BOL BIJAK SIKA

Bol Bijak, or tree leaf, is also used as a musical instrument. The musician selects a fresh raw tree leaf of any suitable kind and plays it like a mouth organ. The edge of the leaf is folded to create a reed, and the musician blows on it to produce sound. This traditional practice is a dying art in Garo music, with fewer people continuing its use today.

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FOLK, Vol: 1, Issue: 1, March 2025

FOLK TRAILS

In its first edition, FOLK follows the trail of an aspiring ethnomusicologist from Assam, in her own words. Upatyaka Dutta, a PhD research scholar in Ethnomusicology at the University of Toronto, shares her experience as a first-time documentary filmmaker, exploring the traditional instrument-making practices of the Khasi community in Meghalaya, India. Her account, a deeply personal one, highlights the importance of empathy-driven conversations rooted in responsibility and respect for community beliefs and sentiments.

Ka Shna Sur(Crafting Sounds of the Khasi Hills), a 2022 documentary directed, shot and edited by Upatyaka was produced with the support of Ideosync-UNESCO Information Fellowship granted to her. As a musician and researcher exploring and documenting the importance of folk instrument makers as bearers of indigenous knowledge and community traditions, Upatyaka while reflecting on her journey, emphasizes: “As filmmakers, researchers, and collaborators, we are not detached observers but active participants in the lives of those we document.”

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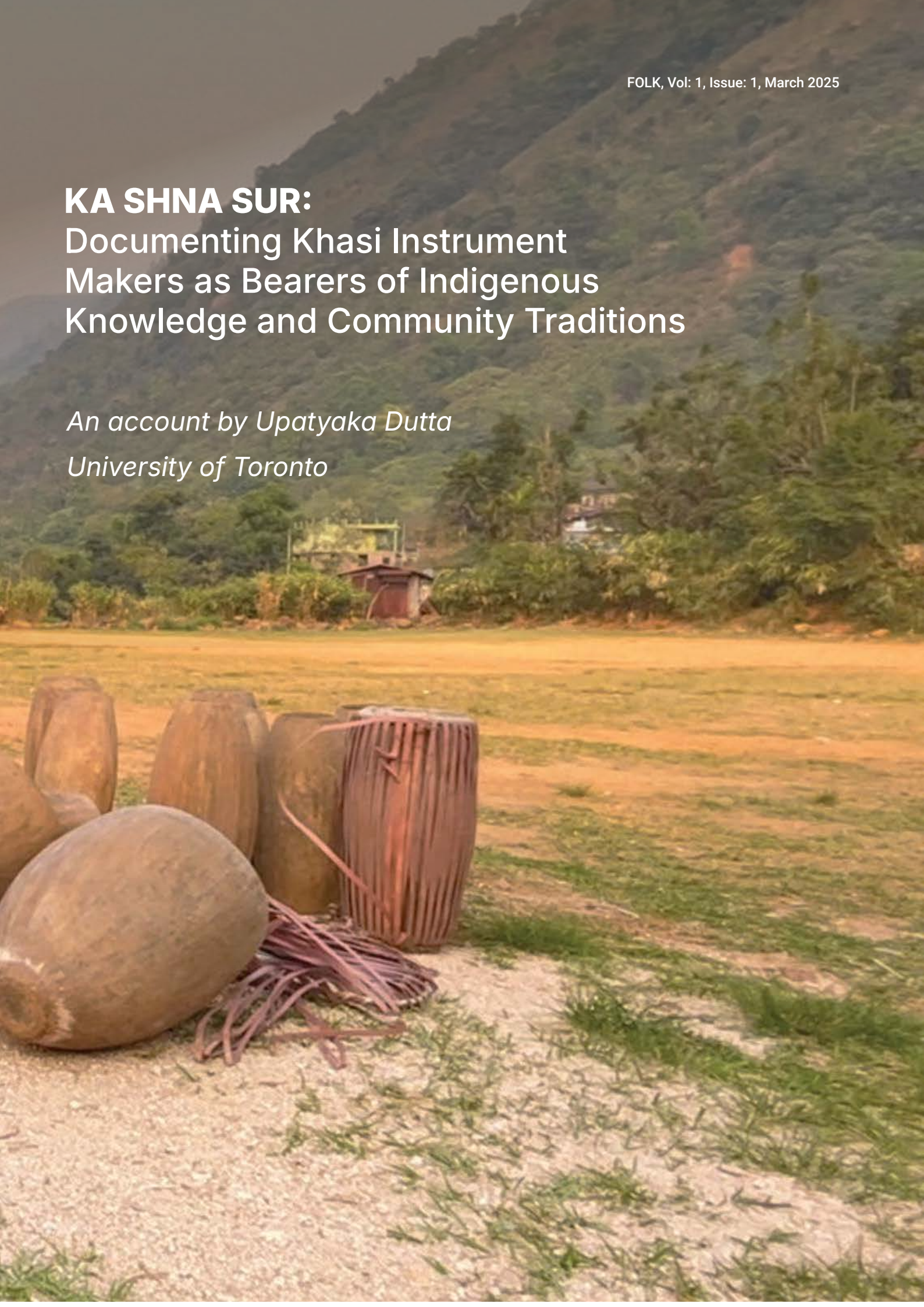
KA SHNA SUR: Documenting Khasi Instrument Makers as Bearers of Indigenous Knowledge and Community Traditions

An account by Upatyaka Dutta

University of Toronto



Exploring a New Medium

When the documentary Ka Shna Sur (Crafting Sounds of the Khasi Hills) was first conceived in early 2021, I was based in Shillong, Meghalaya, teaching music and contemplating the course of my life after two consecutive master's degrees—a much-needed interlude from my long-standing association with academic institutions. This was my moment to experiment with visual storytelling, a medium I had long wished to explore, rooted in my experiences as a musician and an aspiring ethnomusicologist. I decided to apply for the Ideosync-UNESCO Information Fellowship (IUIF), a programme designed to cultivate among young South Asians theoretical frameworks and practice-based skills to understand and facilitate social and behavioural change.

In March 2021, I presented a proposal for my documentary film project, incorporating storyboards and timelines, to a panel that would decide whether the film would receive funding through a grant from the IUIF. My earlier research, conducted in 2020 as part of my master's dissertation at

> *I aimed to accomplish something similar in the Khasi Hills of Meghalaya but through a completely new medium,*

SOAS, University of London, focused on preserving the oral histories of folk instrument-making in Assam, exploring the craft and methods of knowledge transmission among instrument makers across four districts. With the proposed documentary, I aimed to accomplish something similar in the Khasi Hills of Meghalaya but through a completely new medium, engaging a more diverse range of stakeholders in the process.

Upon receiving a grant from IUIF, I welcomed on board the wonderful Phiba Thawbroi, a native Khasi speaker, as my official translator, fully aware that my own grasp of Khasi was limited to basic conversation. Phiba would accompany me

on all my field trips, assisting with conducting interviews in Khasi and supporting the translation process during post-production. In preparation, I explored the available regional literature in English on folk music and musical instruments of Meghalaya, and followed up with my Khasi friends and musicians in Shillong to learn about their associations with local folk musicians and instrument makers. Hence together, Phiba and I, embarked on an initial pilot study, traveling to Wahkhen and Laitkyrhong in the East Khasi Hills district, as well as a visit to a village in Ri Bhoi district, forging connections and conversations with instrument makers and local communities. We were fortunate to connect with Kong Rida Gatpoh, a prominent advocate for folk arts and crafts in Meghalaya and the lead vocalist of the soulful Khasi folk collective, The Musical Folks.

Following our preliminary exploration, the film's focus crystallized around a select group of instrument makers, namely Bah Dominick Lyngkhoi from Nongstoin (West Khasi Hills), Bah Markynsai Diengdoh from Markasa (West Khasi Hills), Bah Rojet Buhphang from Wahkhen (East Khasi Hills), and Bah Risingbor Kurkalang from Laitkyrhong (East Khasi Hills). Besides individual artisans, we also collaborated with organizations dedicated to sustaining these craft and musical traditions. These include the Sieng Riti Institute in Wahkhen, a community-led educational initiative focused on Khasi folk music and instrument-making, and Dakti Crafts, a social enterprise committed to preserving Meghalaya's traditional art and craft practices. The latter is a labour of love of Kong Rida Gatpoh, who is also one of its co-founders.

Making of "Ka Shna Sur"

As a first-time documentary filmmaker with a small team of two persons in the field, I relied mostly on the versatility of my iPhone 13 and the reliability of a Zoom H5 recorder as my primary equipment. The film was shot over extensive field visits to the hometowns of the instrument makers—Wahkhen, Laitkyrhong, Markasa, and Nongstoin between March and April 2022. Following this, an intense editing period in May and June shaped the narrative into its final form.

However, the journey wasn't always smooth. Unexpected events inevitably shaped the filmmaking process. Whether a transformer fire in Wahkhen that caused a power outage severing our connection with the late Bah Rojet for several days leaving us uncertain about how to proceed or receiving the devastating news of Bah Risingbor's mother's passing away in the midst of filming, there were moments when hope flickered.

These were testing times when we had to pause and reflect on the fragility of life and time—on the unseen, unplanned, and unexpected occurrences where work could never take precedence over the rhythms of real life. It was a poignant reminder of the ethical responsibilities that come with storytelling. As filmmakers, researchers, and collaborators, we are not detached observers but active participants in the lives of those we document. It is with patience and humility that we must tread, always respecting the lived realities of those who entrust us with their stories.

Voices from Within

With each instrument maker came a unique story, collectively weaving a narrative of cultural resilience and creativity. Bah Dominick Lyngkhoi, for instance, not only crafts instruments but also generously shares his knowledge with children in Nongstoin, teaching them to play at no cost. The film features a book authored by him in Khasi, documenting the history and craft of these instruments, highlighting his efforts in preserving indigenous knowledge not just through practice but also through written words. Bah Dominick claims to be one of the few remaining artisans who possess the expertise to treat the horn of a bull after its death to craft the tangsong, a traditional Khasi wind instrument. His instrument-making practice is deeply informed by an innate and sincere connection to rural agricultural rhythms, as well as the local flora and fauna, particularly in the sourcing of raw materials like wood. Instrument-making itself follows a seasonal rhythm—there is a time to cut the wood, a time to season it, and a time to craft it to achieve the optimal sound. The artisan further explains that spring is not an ideal season for cutting trees for wood, as they are in a phase of growth and is not mature enough for crafting instruments. Such wisdom reflects the profound knowledge of the local environment that Khasi instrument makers hold—knowledge that is inseparable from their craft and way of life.

Given that the raw materials for Khasi folk instruments are sourced directly from nature, Bah Markynsai Diengdoh has consciously incorporated sustainability into his craft by repurposing scrap wood to create instruments such as the duitara, a traditional Khasi four-stringed instrument. His initiative, Basandarson Luthiery, named in memory of his father, not only preserves indigenous folk traditions but also engages with contemporary luthiery practices. With funding from PRIME Meghalaya, a state-led initiative launched in 2019 to promote entrepreneurship, Luthiery was able to establish his own workshop, develop a distinct brand identity, and expand his craft beyond Khasi instruments to include Western stringed instruments like the guitar.

Through the work of Bah Markynsai and others, the documentary illustrates how Khasi instrument makers navigate the intersection of tradition and innovation, ensuring the continuity of indigenous craftsmanship while adapting to contemporary creative and economic landscapes within India.

Tying together the narratives of Khasi instrument makers to Meghalaya's economy is the work of social enterprises like Dakti Crafts (Dakti meaning "impressions of the hand" in Khasi). Many of these artisans and craftsperson reside in remote areas of the state, crafting instruments primarily for their own communities. As a result, their work remains largely outside formal markets, limiting their access to available economic opportunities. Dakti Crafts addresses this gap by collaborating with artisans to elevate the value of their crafts—transforming, what might otherwise be seen as a cultural practice or hobby into a sustainable livelihood. By facilitating the sale of crafted musical instruments, black clay pottery, and bamboo and cane crafts both within and beyond Meghalaya, Dakti Crafts not only broadens the market for these artisans but also amplifies the visibility of Khasi artisanal heritage. Beyond economic support, Dakti Crafts plays a crucial role in integrating Khasi instrument makers into larger cultural and commercial networks. Through various events such as boutique festivals and strategic partnerships including collaborations with the Meghalaya state government, the organization fosters inclusive and vibrant spaces where artisans can showcase their craft and musical artistry to wider and enthusiastic audiences.

If Dakti Crafts expands the reach of Khasi instrument makers beyond their immediate environments, the Sieng Riti Institute in Wahkhen ensures that the skills, values, and practices that define Khasi folk music are deeply rooted in indigenous ways of learning and living. Kong Rida notes that craft-based learning cannot be confined within the four-walls of a classroom; witnessing where bamboo grows or experiencing how clay is sourced is integral to mastering the skills of making and playing traditional instruments. Sieng Riti stands as an extraordinary example of community-driven education, where students learn through immersion in the natural environment rather than through formal classroom instruction.

Founded in 2002 with 50 students, the institute was co-established by the late Bah Rojet Buhphang, a master craftsman of traditional musical instruments, a folk musician, and farmer who also took on daily wage labour to support his craft. His vision for Sieng Riti extended beyond music literacy - he sought to instill a sense of community and a deep love for Khasi traditions among the young.

Reflecting on the ethos of Sieng Riti, the late Bah Rojet once explained,

"It has a lot to do with the readiness of the people to help us. Firstly, the readiness to help is an integral part of the way of life of the village. For example, if you need me, you call me, I come. And if I need you, I call you, you come. Especially the students who are taught here, we consider them as one of us. They are like the owners. If there is any damage, they have to repair it along with us."

In its formative years, students pursuing Khasi folk music at the Sieng Riti Institute received financial support from the Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi, a practice that helped sustain and strengthen the continuity of these traditions. When Rida first visited the institute in 2010, it was a relatively small and sparsely resourced space. Today, it has become a thriving centre for Khasi folk music, recognized beyond Wahkhen as a vital hub for the transmission of indigenous knowledge.

At Wahkhen, learning remains inseparable from

communal life—students, teachers and the wider community come together to maintain the school, reinforcing a sense of shared ownership and responsibility. Every year, they would come together to repair the institute, a moment I was fortunate enough to witness while filming in Wahkhen. Men gathered materials, instruments lay scattered outside amid the renovations, and some prepared a community feast while others worked. And in the midst of this collective effort, music kept everything alive with the musicians practicing and performing throughout.

Kong Rida Gatpoh is the film's narrator, her voice weaving together disparate yet interconnected narratives, a decision taken organically during post-production, at the editing table. Since the documentary sought to amplify the voices of Khasi instrument makers, it was necessary that a voice from within Meghalaya narrate their story. As the director, cinematographer and editor, I saw myself as a conduit rather than a narrator; my role was to facilitate the transmission of their histories, aspirations, and concerns to the wider world. Kong Rida's insights were invaluable in this process, helping to shape the film's thematic coherence while ensuring it remained grounded in local perspectives. She aptly remarks, "As an individual alone you cannot do much. As a community, if you do it, then it creates a larger impact."

The sustainability of Khasi folk music and instrument-making depends not just on individual artisans but on an interconnected ecosystem of stakeholders. Indigenous artisans possess deep craft knowledge, but sustaining their work requires collaboration with social enterprises like Dakti Crafts, which facilitate market access, and community-driven institutions like Sieng Riti, which ensures the transmission of indigenous knowledge. Students of folk arts evolve into future practitioners, while customers and connoisseurs contribute to the cultural and economic viability of these traditions. This interconnected system linking makers, educators, entrepreneurs, and audiences demonstrates that heritage is actively sustained through collective effort and community engagement rather than passive preservation.

Continuing Conversations

It has been three years since the making of "Ka Shna Sur," and the realities it captured continue to evolve.

In August 2023, we mourned the passing of Late Bah Rojet Buhphang, whose contributions to the Sieng Riti Institute and Khasi folk music traditions remains immeasurable. In March 2023, Bah Risingbor Kurkalang was conferred the Padma Shri, India's fourth-highest civilian award, for his outstanding contributions to the arts, particularly his mastery of traditional instrument-making and Khasi folk music. In November 2024, while immersed in my doctoral fieldwork in Digboi, Assam, I received a call from Bah Dominick Lyngkhoi, informing me of his upcoming performance and stall at a tourism festival in Kaziranga. I congratulated him on being invited to the event and apologised, knowing that I would not be able to leave the fieldwork anytime soon to visit him in Kaziranga.

The stories of the instrument makers persist, continually shaped by new encounters, struggles, and triumphs. The documentary, then, is not an endpoint but a point of departure—an invitation to engage with the evolving narratives of Khasi instrument makers, their craft, and the worlds they shape. I extend my deepest gratitude to ARHI for creating a space to amplify these voices. For an educational documentary of this nature, such acts of sharing are not merely avenues of dissemination but crucial interventions in sustaining and reimagining intangible cultural heritage.

FOLK MUSINGS

With Amulya Rabha

"For any cultural legacy to survive and thrive, it is imperative to embrace change while staying rooted in our traditions." ~ Amulya Rabha

An indigenous Rabha musician and visionary folk instrument maker from Assam, Amulya Rabha is as precious as his name. A self-taught artisan and exceptional musician, his journey reflects the rare depth of human consciousness and artistic dedication.

Driven by passion and a commitment to preserve his rich indigenous cultural heritage, Rabha navigates livelihood challenges with resilience, skill and a graceful simplicity. He firmly believes that the folk music of indigenous communities is necessary for survival and enriches the world we live in.

Soft-spoken and with a gentle demeanour, Amulya Rabha creates handcrafted wonders using locally available materials and has mastered the craft of making and playing 22 different folk instruments. His interminable connection with ancestral rhythms and his persistent efforts to evolve, transform and safeguard the Rabha heritage despite fading interest and financial constraints, make his story one of hope, perseverance, and cultural resilience.

Rabha doesn't just craft instruments; he creates art that embodies a cultural economy where indigenous traditions and economic sustainability coexist. His work demonstrates how culture and livelihood can go hand in hand, contributing to both the preservation and celebration of indigenous heritage. His positive embrace of the evolving nature of indigenous cultures, particularly his own community, is as remarkable as his artistic mastery.

In this exclusive conversation with Folk, Rabha reflects on his enriching journey and shares his thoughts and hope for the future of folk instruments of Northeast India. While he places great faith in the potential of youth, he also offers a word of caution about the distractions of modern life.

In the quiet embrace of Kathipara village in Boko, Rabha lives with his wife and two young daughters, humbly shaping a legacy that will inspire generations.

FOLK, Vol: 1, Issue: 1, March 2025

AMULYA RABHA:

Crafting His Journey, One Instrument at a Time

ED: Thank you for accepting to be the first guest in the first edition of FOLK. How did you get started, and what inspired you to music?

AR: I was born and raised in Kathipara Village of Boko, Assam. Though my parents weren't deeply into music, I was drawn to it from a very young age—perhaps influenced by the vibrant atmosphere of our village. Plays and theatre performances kept the community abuzz, and I was a regular attendee, often participating as well. I vividly remember acting in a drama called Positive-Negative when I was around nine years old, a Class 3 student at the time. I played the role of Sanjib, and that experience left a lasting impression on me. My journey continued through school functions, Bihu workshops, and eventually leading a Bihu group that traveled across the state. Another defining moment was seeing my brother perform on an AIR (All India Radio) program, where he sang Kamrupi Lokogeet. These experiences—both conscious and subconscious—shaped my deep connection with music and set me on this path.

ED: Can you tell us about your journey as a folk instrument maker? The beginning and the inspiration to pursue this craft?

AR: I started out as a musician and gradually transitioned into making my own instruments. While traveling across the country with the Bihu troupe and during studio recordings, I often felt that something was missing—the instruments never quite produced the perfect tune to match the songs. After careful analysis, I realized the issue lay in the measurements. The instruments I was working with weren't finely tuned to my satisfaction, which led me to take matters into

my own hands. Determined to craft instruments that could produce precise and authentic sounds, I began experimenting with locally available resources, applying proper scientific measurements to ensure accuracy. Over time, this pursuit led me to create finely tuned folk instruments. My journey started with crafting a humble Gagana, which I first sold for just Rs. 11. Today, I produce more than 3,000 Gaganas a year—a journey that has truly come a long way!

The roots of this journey trace back to my deep involvement in Bihu, but my greatest inspiration comes from the love and acceptance my craft has received, especially from the youth. The motivation to create perfectly fine-tuned folk instruments continues to drive me forward.

ED: What are some of the traditional instruments you specialize in making, and can you walk us through the process of crafting these instruments? How many can you make?

AR: I began crafting the Indian classical flute in 2010, and over time, I expanded my expertise to nearly 22 folk instruments—all of which I can also play. Some of the instruments I specialize in making include Gagana, Sutuli, Seranda, Ektara, Laukhuri, Dogor, Kham, Baanhi, and Siphoong, among others. Most of my instruments are crafted using locally available materials such as

bamboo, wood, and coconut shells. The process begins long before the actual crafting—it involves careful analysis and research to ensure each instrument produces the perfect sound. Except for the metals used in some instruments, I rely solely on natural, locally sourced materials.

In my home, nothing goes to waste—especially coconut shells. They are an essential part of my craft and my livelihood. For me, they are as sacred as the instruments I create. Through patience, precision, and respect for tradition, I continue to bring these folk instruments to life, ensuring their legacy lives on.

ED: You craft and even play folk instruments. Do you teach people under you? How much do you dedicate to crafting an instrument?

AR: Yes, I have started teaching now, though it took me a long time to decide on it. The thing is, when I craft an instrument, I become completely immersed in the process. Passers-by often see me sitting in the same spot from 8 AM to 4 PM, working with deep focus. People heading to work in the morning would see me crafting, and when they returned in the evening, I would still be there, completely absorbed in my work. Many have wondered if I'm alright, but for me, this is patience and meditation. When I'm

crafting, I forget everything happening around me—it's a state of deep concentration and devotion to my craft.

ED: Since when did you begin crafting instruments professionally? When did you realise that people started noticing your talent?

AR: I had been crafting instruments for quite some time, but it was in 2005 that I decided to take it seriously and pursue it professionally. My decision stemmed from two things—I was frustrated with playing less-than-perfect folk instruments, and I was growing tired of searching for employment. However, it was during the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020 that everything changed for the better. The period of isolation gave me a renewed sense of purpose, pushing me to fully commit to my craft with a passion like never before. Right after the lockdown, I received my first major order—12 Indian classical flutes to be sent to China. At first, I declined the offer, doubting my own abilities. But thanks to an acquaintance who encouraged me, I took on the challenge. To my surprise, I successfully crafted the flutes, each selling for ₹7,000. That moment felt like a turning point—a new lease on life. Eventually, as the story gained attention, reporters and media covered it, and I realized that people had truly started noticing my work.

ED: Did you continue getting bigger orders for folk instruments after the first success?

AR: Yes, I did receive more orders after the first success in China. One notable order came from New Zealand—a Buffalo horn request from an Assamese performer who promotes Bihu there. He was keen on having the instrument crafted specifically by me. Interestingly, many Assamese boys serving in the defense forces also order Buffalo horns from me for their Bihu functions and celebrations at their academies (laughs). It is always a joy to see how these instruments travel across borders, keeping our traditions alive.

ED: How much is a struggle to take instrument making as a profession? And why did you think you will survive this struggle?

AR: The struggle is real. Beyond sourcing materials and crafting, instrument making demands immense passion and patience. But I don't dwell too much on the challenges. There's something deeply fulfilling about seeing hard work pay off—at the end of the day, that sense of satisfaction is my true happiness. I believe in constantly learning and unlearning, adapting to change, and incorporating new insights into my craft. Staying updated with modern advancements helps me evolve, and that's why I believe I will endure this test of time. After all, if I hadn't survived the struggle, I wouldn't be sitting here today, talking to you about Folk and myself for FOLK!

ED: You attended a prestigious Gibson workshop on Violin, Mandolin, and Guitar in Kolkata in 1987. Despite being exposed to Western instrument-making techniques, you chose to continue crafting folk instruments. Why? Did the workshop help?

AR: I was fortunate to attend the Gibson workshop in Kolkata in 1987, thanks to the generosity of a kind lady who sponsored everything. One of the most cherished memories from that experience was meeting Hariprasad Chaurasia—a moment I will always hold dear.

Beyond technical skills, the workshop taught me the art of seclusion in artistic pursuits—the ability to work with patience and perseverance, completely engrossed in my craft. This discipline has helped me create folk instruments

with precision, quality, and perfection.

Although I trained in making modern instruments like the violin, mandolin, and guitar, the high costs of sourcing materials and the dominance of large companies in the industry made it impractical for me to pursue. Instead, I chose to channel my learning into improving and advancing folk instruments. This led to refinements in traditional instruments like the Dotara and Seranda, enhancing their usability and sound.

Modern instruments require expensive materials and mass production, whereas folk instruments lack modernization and refinement. My goal is to bridge this gap—to craft folk instruments that can stand alongside modern ones while preserving their authenticity and soul.

ED: What is the difference between crafting modern instruments and folk instruments?

AR: The main difference lies in the raw materials. Modern instruments require metals and other specialized materials that are often difficult to procure and come at a high cost.

Folk instruments, on the other hand, rely on the artistic sensibility of the craftsperson. They can be sustainably crafted using locally available materials, minimizing wastage while preserving tradition. This makes folk instrument-making a more resourceful and environmentally friendly craft.

ED: What role do you think folk instruments play in preserving cultural heritage, and how do you see your work contributing to this effort?

AR: Folk instruments play a crucial role in preserving cultural heritage, but not at the cost of stagnation. Evolution and transformation are just as important. Folk music and instruments will only survive if they can compete with modern instruments. That is why crafting these instruments with precision and proper scientific techniques is essential to keeping our cultural heritage alive.

I don't know how much of a contribution I've made, but I have tried to bring meaningful change through careful observation and study. My goal is to see traditional folk instruments played on stage alongside modern instruments. To make this possible, I have introduced innovations like a folding Karanal for easier portability and used guitar strings in crafting the Badungdupa to produce a louder, richer sound.

Of course, I have faced criticism for these changes—some have accused me of endangering our cultural heritage. But the truth is, progress requires change. To preserve something, we must also allow it to evolve for the better!

ED: Would you love to share any memorable experiences or performances, where your instruments played a significant role?

AR: Yes! One of my most memorable experiences was when 3,000 Naasonis (female Bihu dancers) played my Gagana, creating a breathtaking spectacle that truly captured the essence of Assam. I never took Gagana making seriously—let alone considering it professionally—until I realized its significance. When I finally committed to it, I knew I had to craft the perfect Gagana. Two things inspired and motivated me in this pursuit: First, if a graceful

Naasoni holds the Gagana in her mouth, it must blend seamlessly with her movements, complementing her elegance. Second, an affluent girl would never settle for an ordinary Gagana—it had to stand out, both in craftsmanship and quality. This pursuit of perfection became my driving force. And silently, as I watched 3,000 Naasonis play my Gagana, my heart swelled with pride (flashes a proud smile).

ED: What advice do you have for young instrument makers or those interested in learning this craft?

AR: Patience and the zeal to learn and share are the most important qualities for anyone interested in this craft. Today's youth are full of potential; they just need to hold onto their passion and plans with determination. Instead of solely seeking employment or relying on subsidies, they should focus on honing their skills and channeling their creative energy to empower themselves. We live in a land of opportunities, rich with natural resources. The key is to utilize these resources wisely and sustainably, with patience and perseverance, to create something truly meaningful and exemplary.

Empowering Indigenous Communities ARHI's Journey

Established in 2008, ARHI is a nonprofit dedicated to uplifting Northeast India's indigenous tribes through their own knowledge systems. Focused on sustainable development, its work spans women empowerment, artisanal crafts, language revitalization, traditional medicine, textiles, and entrepreneurship. By blending cultural preservation with progress, ARHI employs its unique R-R-R (Research, Reflection, Revitalization) approach to ensure community-driven, sustainable outcomes.
Central to ARHI's mission is empowering women through skill development. By reviving endangered crafts , it fosters economic independence while preserving heritage. Simultaneously, the organization safeguards vanishing languages by documenting oral histories and creating educational tools.. ARHI's entrepreneurship initiatives further bridge tradition and modernity, helping artisans market their crafts globally.
At the heart of its cultural preservation is the Folk Culture Research Centre (FCRC), which documents intangible heritage—folk songs, rituals, textiles—using audio-visual and digital tools.

This repository not only protects ephemeral traditions but also empowers communities to reclaim their identity. In 2018, UNESCO's ICHCAP recognized ARHI as the only organization from Assam in Southeast Asia leveraging intangible heritage for sustainable development, highlighting its global relevance.
ARHI's R-R-R method ensures participatory growth: *Research* maps cultural assets with indigenous input, *Reflection* engages communities in strategizing solutions, and *Revitalization* implements projects like craft cooperatives or language workshops.

This model has become a blueprint for culturally rooted development.
By intertwining heritage with empowerment, ARHI proves that tradition and progress can coexist. Its work not only safeguards Northeast India's cultural legacy but also paves the way for inclusive, equitable growth—a testament to the power of indigenous knowledge in shaping a sustainable future.

FOLK CULTURE RESEARCH CENTRE
OF NORTH EAST INDIA

Folk

LORES OF NORTHEAST INDIA