



FOLK CULTURE RESEARCH
CENTRE OF NORTH EAST
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Folk

LORES OF NORTHEAST INDIA

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In this edition
**Folk Instruments
of NE India II**

Folk Trails

Preserving NE's Musical
Heritage by Dr Utpola
Borah and Hans Utter

Folk Musings

With Pema Tashi



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EDITORIAL

May the Folk Be With Us!

As we move forward from our inaugural edition, we are delighted to present the second edition of Folk. Continuing our journey into the rich cultural traditions of Northeast India, this edition brings together a diverse collection of folk instruments used by various indigenous communities, documented by writers and researchers from across the region.

The featured write-ups are a reminder of the incredible skill, craftsmanship and technical knowledge involved in creating folk instruments, indigenous traditions that have been carefully preserved and passed down through generations. Crafted from locally available natural materials, these instruments embody the ingenuity of communities and their deep connection with nature and culture.

Every folk instrument tells a story of skill, survival, craftsmanship and folklore. Together, they celebrate the beauty of life and the cultural identities they represent. In this edition, we pay tribute to Manipur's Pena, while Assam's Gogona reflects the craft and spirit of the land. The folk instruments of the Mising community reveal their evolution from hunting tools to musical instruments, the Hajong instruments preserve the rhythm of a living culture, and the Dimasa instruments echo the landscapes and traditions of their homeland.

We also follow the folk trails of ethnomusicologists Utpola Borah and Hans Utter as they work towards preserving the musical heritage of Northeast India. In this edition, we share our folk musings with Pema Tashi, the celebrated Monpa folk artist from Tawang, Arunachal Pradesh, reflecting on his journey as a folk vocalist and his passion for creating and preserving art. We celebrate his dedication to safeguarding indigenous knowledge systems and his commitment to passing them on to future generations. Through his reflections, he reminds us that keeping traditions such as folk music and folk instruments alive requires not only their continued practice but also sustained efforts towards documentation, preservation, and knowledge-sharing.

With this edition of Folk, we invite our readers to explore and discover the fascinating world of folk instruments from Northeast India, each carrying the voice, memory, and heritage of its people. We encourage everyone to listen to the stories around them, cherish them, and share with the world the beauty they hold. In times when cultures and traditions are increasingly vulnerable to change, it is these stories, songs, and memories that remind us of the richness of our shared human heritage and the beauty that allows the world to flourish.

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FOLK INSTRUMENTS OF NORTHEAST INDIA II:

A Celebration

Continuing our exploration of the folk instruments of Northeast India, this edition celebrates the rich musical traditions embodied in Manipur's Pena, Assam's Gogona, and the folk instruments of the Mising, Hajong, and Dimasa communities.

In this second edition of FOLK, we explore instruments that are deeply intertwined with the identities, histories, and cultural expressions of the indigenous peoples of the region. The five featured write-ups offer both an insightful and creative exploration of how these instruments came into being, the communities that nurture them, and the stories they continue to carry across generations.

More than musical instruments, they are repositories of memory, craftsmanship, folklore, and tradition, each resonating with the unique rhythms of Northeast India.



PENA

An ode to Manipur's Living Cultural Heritage

✍ Birina Goswami

Thousands of years ago, in India's land of jewels Manipur, an instrument blossomed into existence, the sacred tune of which still celebrates a bejewelled land, its history, people and spirit. This bowed mono-string indigenous instrument representing the cultural and spiritual legacy of the Meitei people of Manipur is one of the oldest known traditional instruments that has an identity of its own. Called the Pena, its melody echoes through the rhythm of ancient traditions binding tales of human civilization and stories of existence. Legends say that the sound produced by Pena was not only melodic, but a sacred utterance that led to the creation of the world and life.

Historically, the origin of Pena dates back to around 33-154 BC during the reign of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba. Many scholars also suggest that it was first played in a formal setting by Nongda's court singer, Leinung Tharuk Asheiba and was later played by Lord Thanjing, the progenitor of Moirang. Ancient manuscripts further mention that Nahaba Moirangjampha and the minister Ningol Yaimaba took the initiative to refine its melodies. Nahaba is also revered as the first human to play the Pena. Together they contributed to the development of notes and finger movements. From earliest times, musicians would play the Pena in the Mangol (veranda) or the Sangoi (inner part of the house). Through its music, they expressed love, devotion, and triumph. The Pena is also known by other names, such as Tingteliain in Tangkhul (an indigenous Naga community largely concentrated in Ukhrul and Kamjong districts of Manipur) and Labum in Kabui (one of the indigenous Naga communities of Manipur).

The Pena consists of two principal parts: *Cheijing* and *Maru*.



The Cheijing(bow), held and guided by the right hand, is revered as the god father. The Maru(sound box), resting gently against the chest, is regarded as the god mother. It is believed that the melodious tune created by their union, through the delicate friction of the two components, holds a deeper significance. In its essence lies the secret of creation...of this world and life.

The bow, known as the Pena Cheijing, is crafted from the Eureirom tree. A branch of this tree is carefully bent into the shape of a question mark. From its top to bottom, horsehair is stretched to form the bowstring. This part of the instrument comprises of ten principal elements:

1. Tenou Yotkol : The curved iron frame
2. Cheikhok: The wooden handle
3. Sharik: The small brass bells
4. Cheijing Shamei : Tassel made from horsehair
5. Uchan Marek: A small, oily piece of pine wood used to smoothen and straighten the strings.
6. Khurou Lang: Cotton thread used for tying and hanging.
7. Mon: The cloth at the end of the Shamei
8. Khubi Khang: Cloth adjoining to Mon
9. Lang Thangjing: A fine cotton thread
10. Konthang: An iron ring

The Pena's Maru or sound box consists of nine elements : The Maru is the resonator. It is shaped like a bowl and is traditionally made from a dried coconut shell, covered with a piece of leather called Pungmai. Some believe that in ancient times, the maru was crafted using clay. Over time, the method evolved : Began with earth, followed by the primary root of a bamboo plant to eventually be replaced by coconut shell. The covering of the Maru has also evolved through the ages. Earlier, the skin of a large frog was used. Later, came the hide of a bull. Near the Maru lies the curved wooden base of the neck called Uyek. The upper part of the neck is made from a hollow bamboo pipe called the Utong. The Shamei (string) is designed from the hair of a horse's tail. At its centre lies the Nura-Khangset, the binding thread beyond which the finger cannot move. The Leina, a decorative piece of knitted cloth, is fixed to the neck in an inverted U-shape with thrums hanging down the thread knots known as Chambuli Lang. The Tenkhal, a small piece of thumb-sized bamboo, serves as the bridge. Through these carefully assembled parts, the Pena emerges both as an instrument of music and as an identity of tradition.

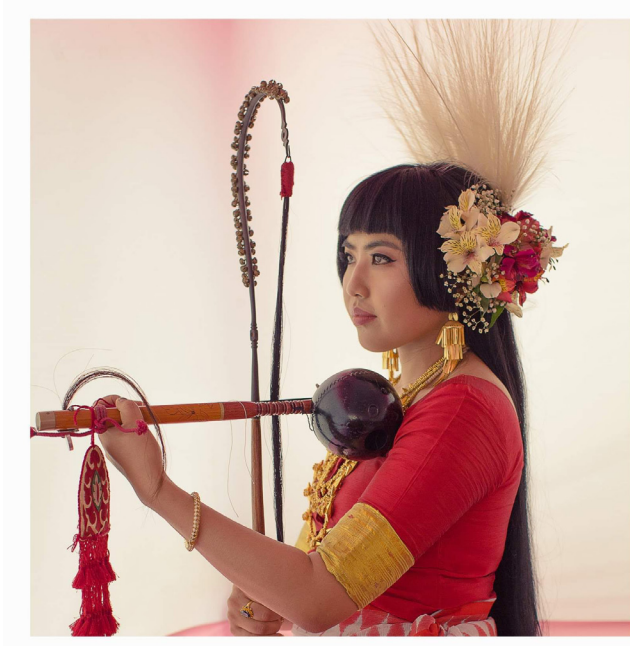
The making of the Pena is not merely a craft; it is a centuries-old tradition passed down through generations. Drawing inspiration from nature and culture, this instrument of the Meiteis is a living heritage that narrates a thousand splendid stories through its crafting and melodies. From the earthen pot and the shell of the coconut to carefully chosen wood, and brass bells, the Pena is an art that defines a community's artistic capabilities and traditional wisdom. Assembled with care, each component of the instrument meticulously passes through several stages of refinement before attaining its final form as a living embodiment of tradition and belief. The Pena is of two types: the Big Maru and the Small Maru. The larger form is simply known as the Pena, while the smaller one is called the Khutkhong Pena. This smaller variant is often used during festivals such as the festivals of the Chakpa, one of the original settlers of Manipur.

The Pena holds a significant place in various rituals and festivals in Manipuri culture. It is played during the Lai Haraoba festival, as well as in ceremonies marking birth and death. Traditionally, on the sixth day after a child's birth, the Pena is played to protect the infant from the evil eye—an ancient practice that predates the influence of Hinduism in Manipur.



In funerals, Pena is played before the body is taken for the final rites. The Nongarol song which accompanies the instrument's tune describes the separation and the journey of the soul as it departs from the mortal body. In weddings too, Pena's music along with prayers are played seeking divine blessings. These songs often recount the creation of the world, the origin of humankind, and the values of marital life.

In earlier times, the Meitei people played the Pena for entertainment at leisure, especially after the harvest. Accordingly, Pena can be divided into two categories: Pena Phamshak and Pena Pala. Phamsak refers to performances for entertainment, while Pala is performed during rituals such as weddings and funerals.



Pena's music has also played a significant role in the preservation and development of Manipuri literature since time immemorial. Early Manipuri language and folk literature were often rendered alongside the music of the Pena. Deeply rooted in Manipuri tradition, the Pena's journey from ancient rituals and ceremonies to entertainment, folk literature, culture, and modern media such as cinema and theatre carries within it the soul of Manipur's rich indigenous creative legacy and pride.

Today, the Pena is also played by women and has found its place on both national and international platforms, creating a distinct identity of its own. As the foundation of many forms of Manipuri music, the Pena continues to make history and remains a source of immense pride for the people of Manipur, and consequently, for the Northeast as a whole.

Assam's Gogona

Folk Culture, Craft and Identity

✍ Dr. Chandra Kamal Chetia
Translated by: Ashish Saikia

In Indian performing arts, the use and importance of various musical instruments has always occupied a pride of place along with songs, dance and drama. The Natyashastra also documents aspects of various musical instruments. Indian musical literature has broadly divided musical instruments into four categories, which are:

1. Avanaddha Vadya (Percussion instruments)
2. Ghana Vadya (Solid instruments/Idiophones)
3. Tata Vadya (Stringed instruments), and
4. Sushira Vadya (Wind instruments).

This write-up centres and talks about Assam's significant folk instrument: Gogona.

Gogona: A Brief Introduction



The Gogona is one of the major folk instruments primarily associated with Assam's spring festival, Bohag Bihu. While some classify the Gogona as a wind instrument (Sushira Vadya), it cannot strictly be called so. This is because, unlike a flute, pepa, or xutuli, the Gogona is not played by blowing air through it. Instead, when the player taps the back end (the knob) of the Gogona with the fingers, the string-like bamboo reed in the middle (locally called the "tongue") produces a vibrating sound. This vibration is amplified and refined by two thin wing-like bamboo slivers, known as the 'mekhela', attached to the sides of the middle section. The sound is further refined and made more melodious through the rhythmic contraction and expansion of the player's mouth cavity which draws airflow inward rather than expelling it outward, as in most typical wind instruments. In this respect, the Gogona cannot be entirely classified as a wind instrument. Rather, it is an indigenous folk instrument with characteristics of both stringed (Tata) and wind (Sushira) instruments.

However, instruments akin to the Gogona are found worldwide, beyond Assam. Like, the English "Jew's Harp". It is worth noting that while there are differing views on the origin of its name and the antiquity of the instrument, most anthropological research today traces the early history of the Jew's Harp to ancient Chinese civilization. The basis of this association is largely because of the discovery of a 3rd century BCE ancient painting in China, depicting a woman playing an instrument resembling the Jew's Harp.

Additionally, the discovery of a Jew's Harp-like instrument at the Shimao fort in Shaanxi,

China led many anthropologists to believe and suggest that early Chinese civilization first contributed to the crafting of such instruments. Regardless of its precise origin, this instrument has spread far and wide across cultures in different parts of the world, taking diverse forms and identities such as Maultrommel in Germany, Angkouch in Cambodian, Agiz Kopuzu in Turkish, Dan Moi in Vietnamese, Gue Gueq in Northern China, Mukkuri in Japanese, and Jew's Harp in Denmark.

In India's North and South, metallic variants of Gogona-like instruments such as Morchang (Rajasthan), Morsing (Tamil), and Changu (Sindh) are both popular and noteworthy. The instrument is also found in Nepal, where it is known as Murchunga in the local language and is typically made of brass. In Northeast India, however, it is traditionally crafted entirely from locally available bamboo. Across the diverse regions of the Northeast, it is known by different names in different communities such as Gogona, Gungang, Mieng, Oku, and Hrong. In Assam, the traditional Jew's Harp is known as the Gogona and is made from a single piece of seasoned bamboo. The Assamese Gogona can be classified into several categories, as discussed below.

Types of Gogona



In Assam, the Gogona is primarily divided into two categories: the Ramdhan Gogona and the Lahori Gogona. The Gogona used by men is called the Ramdhan Gogona, while the one used by young women is called the Lahori Gogona. The difference between the two lies mostly in the playing technique and crafting style. Besides them, several other regional variations of the Gogona are crafted in Assam. Among these, the Shalikithutiya Gogona, Bor Gogona, Chunga Gogona, and Kakoi Gogona are prominent.

Ramdhan Gogona: One of the most widely used types of Gogona in Assam today is the Ramdhan Gogona. The length of this Gogona is about fourteen fingers. It is played by gently striking it with the tip of the thumb or the middle joint of the index finger. The Ramdhan Gogona consists of a front knob that controls the vibration, a fine stick-like middle “tongue”, thin side wings, and a slender, pointed front section. Because of its slender and pointed front part, it becomes very convenient for female dancers (nachonis) to tuck the instrument into their hair buns (khopa). Because of this, some people also refer to this type of Gogona as the Lahori Gogona.

Lahori Gogona: The type of Gogona specifically used by young women is called the Lahori Gogona. It is slightly shorter than the Ramdhan Gogona. Notably, the instrument is also found among various tribes in Arunachal Pradesh. A string about six fingers long is attached near the vibrating knob of the Gogona. Unlike the Ramdhan Gogona, which has separate wing-like ‘mekhela’ pieces, the thin wings of the Lahori Gogona are carved out of the same single piece of bamboo alongside the central stick-like tongue. By pulling the attached string in a specific rhythm, melodies are produced as needed. The front part of this Gogona is not as long and slender like the Ramdhan Gogona.

Chunga Gogona: A special type of Gogona with a tube-like (chungu) design is seen specifically in the Ahom-dominated areas of Upper Assam. In the local language, it is called Chungu-Gogona. A medium-sized internode section from the top of a Jati bamboo is kept intact at one end to form a tube-like shape. When playing this Gogona, the vibration created in the player’s mouth cavity resonates within the attached bamboo tube, amplifying the sound twofold. This type of Gogona is exclusively used by men. Currently, the Chungu Gogona is on the verge of extinction.

Bor Gogona: The Bor Gogona is three times longer and three fingers wider than the Ramdhan Gogona. It has traditionally been used as a male-centric instrument in Upper Assam. Unfortunately, the use of this instrument has significantly declined today.

Shalikithutiya Gogona: With a total length of just six fingers, small enough to be hidden inside a dancer’s hair bun, this tiny Gogona is called the Shalikithutiya Gogona. Due to its miniature size being compared to the tiny beak of a Myna bird (Shaliki), it has been named Shalikithutiya Gogona.

Kakoi Gogona: The Kakoi Gogona is a decorative instrument. The bottom part is shaped like a bamboo comb (kakoi phoni), while the top part is specifically carved into a Gogona. A beautiful motif of a peacock is often carved in the middle section. This single piece serves the dual purpose of both a comb and a musical instrument.

Crafting the Gogona

To craft a Gogona, a mature, sun-baked piece of Jati bamboo is required. Discarding the middle section of such bamboo, the top sections down to about three internodes are considered more suitable for making the Gogona. From a piece of bamboo about six to seven inches long, three finger-widths of the inner soft part (belly) at one end are peeled off. While peeling this off, a small knob is left at the very end. The knob maintains the balance of the middle part of the Gogona. After smoothening the bamboo piece in this manner, a very fine, seven-finger-long bristle (reed) is carved out in the center, keeping an equal distance from both sides. The tip of this reed is scraped slightly thinner than its base. This stick-like reed acts as the “tongue” of the Gogona. The sound produced by the Gogona is generated by the vibration of this reed. The bamboo on both sides of this reed is slightly split to attach two thin slivers of bamboo skin. These two thin pieces amplify the sound of the Gogona by providing resonance.

In colloquial language, these two thin parts are called the ‘mekhela’. The fully crafted Gogona is held against the lips, ensuring it doesn’t touch the teeth or tongue, and is rhythmically tapped at one end to control the exhaled/inhaled air, producing various tunes.

With slight variations to this method, bamboo Gogonas are made across Assam and Northeast India.

For Lahori Gogona, a thick hemp or muga silk thread is attached to the front part of the balancing knob. Tightening and loosening this thread while playing creates various melodies.

On the other hand, making a Chunga Gogona requires a full bamboo internode from the mature top section of a Jati bamboo with a node at one end. The shape of the Gogona, about six fingers long, is carved out from the base end of this internode. The part placed in the mouth retains the shape of the tube. When played, the sound resonates in the front tubular section, amplifying the sound.

The total length of the Shalikithutiya Gogona is just six fingers. The tongue of this small instrument is carved to a length of three fingers.

The Kakoi Gogona is essentially a decorative piece; its top half is shaped like a Gogona, and the bottom half like a comb. The middle section is carved with shapes of birds and butterflies for ornamentation.

Playing Style

“Gogona aaroni
Gogona phuroni,
Gogona kihere bao,
Duphale duchoti majote echoti, ushahor tipote bao”

(The Gogona begins, the Gogona concludes, how shall the Gogona be played? Two pieces on the sides, one in the middle, it shall be played with the rhythm of breath)

The phrase ‘ushahor tipote’ (in the rhythm of breath) in the above Bihu lyrics particularly signifies the playing style of the Gogona. By rhythmically tapping the front knob, vibrations are created in the middle tongue. However, to distinctly articulate these sounds into various melodies, the contraction and expansion of the mouth cavity play a crucial role. When necessary, drawing air from outside through the mouth helps set various tones to Gogona’s notes.

On the other hand, for the Lahori Gogona, a muga silk thread is tied to the end of the knob, and sound is produced by pulling this thread. A piece of thin bamboo stick, about one finger long, is attached to the thread for a better grip. Melodies are created by tightening and loosening this thread and the corresponding movement of the mouth cavity and tongue.

Folk Beliefs and Songs Centered Around the Gogona

According to a prevailing belief in Assamese folk culture, if one secretly steals the Bo (a bamboo component of a loom used to lift the warp threads) from the loom of an expert weaver on a Saturday or Tuesday to make a Gogona, its sound will become exceptionally sweet. Although rooted in folk belief, this idea is not entirely baseless.

Traditionally, skilled Assamese weavers preserved their loom accessories with great care. After weaving, they would often rub mustard oil on the Bo tube and store it on the bamboo rack (Dhowa Chang) above the main hearth. Stored in this manner for years, the Bo tube would gradually become extremely smooth, thin, and well-seasoned. Moreover, the smoke from the hearth protected the material from woodborers and other destructive insects.

A Gogona made from such a Bo tube is usually thin and lightweight. This enables it to produce a variety of tunes with ease as air moves in and out of the mouth. In contrast, a Gogona made from fresh bamboo is comparatively heavier in the beginning and cannot produce tunes as swiftly or delicately as one crafted from an aged Bo tube. For this reason, the folk belief still prevails in the villages of Assam that an excellent-quality Gogona can be made from the Bo tube of an expert weaver.

Gogona in Bihu Songs

The Gogona is not merely a musical instrument; it is regarded as a cherished token that carries messages of love and romance between young hearts. During Bohag Bihu, there was a popular tradition in the villages of Upper Assam in which a young man would give a Gogona to his beloved as a Bihu gift. References to this custom can be found in several Bihu songs, such as:

Gogona aaroni
Gogona phuroni
Gogonat bindhile ghune
Moromor chenaiti kaxot nayekiya
Gogona sajibo kone

(The Gogona begins/ the Gogona concludes / Woodborers have pierced
 the Gogona / My beloved is not by my side / Who will craft a Gogona for me now?)

Furthermore, the message of deep love exchanged between youths through the tunes of the Gogona is also reflected in Bihu songs like:

O'te shunilo
t'te bujilo
Mor dhone Gogona bay
Kino omator mate oi lahari
Bukedi xoroki jay.

(I heard it there, I understood it here / My sweetheart is playing the Gogona / What a
 speechless, silent melody, oh beautiful one / It pierces right through my heart.)

Agoli bahore lahari Gogona
Bohi tator patot bao
Aheki nahe oi more oi senaidhon
Siri pati mongolkhon sao.

(A Lahori Gogona made from the tender tip of bamboo/ I play it while sitting at my loom./ Will my beloved
 come or not?/ I read the omens to seek an auspicious sign.)

Some Bihu songs also describe the method of playing the Gogona:

Gogona aaroni
Gogona phuroni
Gogona kihere bao
Duphale duchoti majote echoti
Muga xuta logaye bao.

(How do I play the Gogona? / Two pieces on the sides, one in the middle / I play
 by attaching a muga thread.)

Conclusion

Although the word Gogona is closely associated with Assam, similar instruments are found in cultures across different parts of the world. However, the Assamese Gogona has its unique charm and originality. While it is primarily divided into two categories, Ramdhan and Lahori, several regional variants such as Chunga Gogona, Shalikithutiya Gogona, Bor Gogona, and Kakoi Gogona are also crafted in Assam.

In the larger Asomiya cultural context, the Gogona is not merely a musical instrument but a symbol of Assamese identity and heritage. It continues to serve as a vibrant carrier of culture in Assamese public life.

From Hunt to Tune

Mising Folk Instruments as a Living Cultural Craft

✍ Dr Bijoy Krishna Doley
Translated by: Kakoli Bora

Oral traditions and narratives play a major role in preserving and reconstructing indigenous histories. They serve as repositories of culture, tradition, migration, origin, identity, and the belief systems of communities. Among the Misings of Assam, the oral narratives known as Abang are rich sources of history and culture of the community. One such Abang traces the origins of certain Mising folk musical instruments to hunting tools once used by the tribe.

In earlier times, the Misings often formed hunting groups, and references to various hunting weapons frequently appear in their oral narratives. Weapons such as Gédéng, Di:bung, De:pit, Di:ro, Égéng, Gi:ro, Yoksa, Ganno, Dodbo, Yoktung, Matsik, Yoksig, and Dumpak are repeatedly mentioned. Significantly, some of these hunting implements later came to be used as musical instruments. This suggests that the sounds produced by these weapons during hunting gradually found expression in music, transforming humble hunting tools into instruments of rhythm and melody. Instruments such as Dumpak, made from pieces of dry bamboo; Chabrow-Yokcha, a type of flat metal ring; Tu:lung, made of bamboo; and Dumpé, played by the mouth using tree leaves, were once associated with hunting practices before becoming a significant part of the Mising folk music tradition.

Mising folklore also preserves legends connected with the origin of musical instruments. According to one such legend, a man named Karbo:Li:Pig migrated long ago from the hills to the plains of Assam. Later, two other individuals joined him in the plains: one was entrusted with the responsibility of animal husbandry and the other with warfare. The livestock keeper, known as Karki Mili, owned a herd of Mithun (Drung Ox). Folklore narrates that one day his herd disappeared from the grazing fields. Distressed, Karki Mili searched frantically for them but failed to find any trace. During one such search in the forest, he encountered a stranger to whom he narrated his plight. The stranger handed him a flute-like instrument and advised him, “If you play the names of the female Mithun in tune on this instrument, they will return.” Following the stranger’s advice, Karki Mili played the instrument in the forest, and to his surprise, the missing Mithun herd returned to him. This instrument later came to be known as the Éjug Tapung.

An introduction to Mising Folk Instruments

In Mising society, a lot many musical instruments find their origin from various hunting tools. Primarily an agricultural community, the Misings are ardent lovers of music and entertainment. They celebrate several agriculture-based festivals such as Ali-Aye-Ligang, Po-rag, Dobur and Amrag where handmade instruments are commonly used. It has been observed that the Misings as a community uses limited manufactured material objects. They rely mostly on sustainable materials found in and around their vicinity like bamboo, Nol-khagori, wild gourd and other naturally available materials to craft musical instruments.

Here are some of the major Mising Folk instruments :

Membranophone: Dumdum, Dendun, Dentug, Dumpak.

Idiophone: Lupi, Lé:nong, Marbang, Barbang, Yoksa, Kokter, Toka, Ramtal.

Aerophone: Tapung, Pi:li, Pempa, Gung-Gang, Tu:lung, Dumpé, Dérki Tapung.

Chordophone: Ko:Réng, Jegréng, Ke:Kung, Tokari, Pu:i.



Most Mising folk instruments are made from bamboo, animal horn, skin, and similar natural materials. Therefore, it is difficult to classify some of the instruments into the above categories, as several are also made from a combination of materials.

Crafting Mising Folk Instruments: The Art and its Use

DUMPAK :

Dumpak is one of the most significant traditional musical instruments of the Mising people. According to legends, this instrument was originally used as a hunting tool. The Mising people traditionally went hunting in groups, a practice locally known as Ki:rug. During hunting activities, they created sounds by striking tree branches, leaves, dry bamboo, and other objects. The sound produced by dry bamboo resembled “Dumpak, Dumpak,” from which the instrument is believed to have derived its name. Later, it came to be used in Mising society as a folk musical instrument.

A piece of dry bamboo is the main material used to craft this instrument. One end of the bamboo piece is kept closed with its natural knot, while the knot at the other end is cut open. About five finger-widths below the open end, the hard outer portion of the bamboo is trimmed away, leaving the thinner part intact at the bottom. This prepared bamboo piece is then used as the instrument, with one end closed and the other left open.

While beaten like a drum, the instrument produces sounds like:

Dumpak Dumpak dumdum pak
Tegdum Dumpak dumdum pak

And when played during dances, it produces rhythms like:

Dumdum dumdum dumpak dumpak
Tegdum dumdum dumpak dumpak
Dumdum dumpak tegdum dumpak
Tegdum dumpak dumdum pak

The instrument is used in Oini:tom, kaban songs and other performances.

DUMPÉ :

Dumpé was used as a hunting tool by the Misings in ancient times, especially while hunting Sidum, also known as the hog deer. It is believed that the sound produced by this instrument resembled the call of the Sidum or hog deer. Therefore, the name of the instrument is considered to have originated from the name of the animal itself: Sidum + pé = Dumpé.

Dumpé are of three types:

- a. Takamaglong Ané
- b. Dorbum
- c. Sépok

Dumpé is crafted using a special leaf called “Takamaglong” along with some kind of grass. For the Takamaglong Ané Dumpé, the Takamaglong leaf is very essential. This leaf is pierced in a special way and blown through the mouth.

For crafting Dorbum, Nol-khagori (a kind of tall grass) is essential. The instrument is played by blowing through the hollow part of the knotted stem of the Nol-khagori. Similarly, crafting Sépok requires the powder of a tree called Tonga.

The Mising people use these instruments in Aptaso:nam, which means hunting dance. At present, the practice of hunting dance has greatly lessened in Mising society. However, these dances and songs are still performed during community festivals and conventions.

DENDUN :

Dendun, one of the Mising folk instruments also called Pi:séng dumdun in the Mibu abang or Deudhai geet goes:

*Pi:muglo pingkolo réllé réllé
Nébiré birkolo réllé réllé,
Pi:séngé dumdumé réllé réllé
Régumé Sa:dung réllé réllé
Ejugé tapunge réllé réllé
Rélungé Sa:dung réllé réllé*

Which means that, through the sound of the Pimuk instrument, Mother Earth has become lush and fertile. The sound of the Dendun, in the tune of Pi:séng dumdum and Ejugé tapunge, resembles the sound of a drum. Its rhythm goes:

*Lendak diginno lendak,
Tag télin-nang yélen-ennang
Teland étengel nang.*

Dendun is made from the mature stems of a plant called Tonga. It is prepared by carefully shaping the hollow portions of the stems into a soft sheath. The sound produced from this soft sheath is highly melodious. The melody of the Dendun is used in the accompaniment of Oini:tom songs and Mising folk dances.

DENTUG :

Dentug is a lightweight folk instrument made from raw bamboo. The sound of the Dentug resembles that of the house sparrow, locally known as Binbir Tortor, which goes like:

*Binbir Tortor Binbir Tortor
Binbir Tortor*

Similarly, the sound produced by the Dentug bears a close resemblance to the chirping of the house sparrow:

*Dentug tug tug,
Dentug tug tug
Dentug tug tug tug tug tug*

With the gradual rise in the rhythm of the Dentug, it feels as though the instrument is instructing a weaver to spin yarn and weave the Mirizim, like:

*Takin takpin takpin pintok
Takpin takpin takpin pintok
Onnom moto gaddom sumto
Takip takpin takpin pinto*

For crafting the Dentug, a young bamboo culm is used. The bamboo is cut while keeping the nodes intact at both ends. The hard outer layer of the bamboo is then carefully shaved off without causing cracks, leaving about 1.5 inches intact from one end to the other. A square hole is made in the middle of the softened portion of the bamboo. The instrument is played by striking it with a stick. Dentug is commonly used in dances and songs performed during the Ali-Aye Ligang festival as well as during Oini:tom.

TU:TOK AND DÉRKI TAPUNG :

Tu:tok is a traditional wind instrument. It is called Tu:tok Tapung because it is played while bending downward.

Dérki Tapung is made from a bamboo variety called Dérki found in the hills and hence the instrument derives its name as Dérki Tapung. It is imperative to mention that since the instrument is held horizontally while being played by the artist, it is also known as Kétpong (horizontal) Tapung. Mising legends suggest that in ancient times, Dérki Tapung was played along with 'Midang Ni:tam' during the wedding ceremonies in the Mising community.

Tu:tok Tapung is also crafted from the same Dérki bamboo found in the hills. In earlier times, the Mising youths would play melancholic tunes on the instrument while grazing cattle in the fields or passing time in the Tongi ghar (an indigenous watchtower in the crop fields). This instrument is particularly used during the performance of Oini:tom.

In present times, Dérki Tapung is more commonly used in the Mising society than Tu:tok Tapung. It is widely used in Mising folk music and folk songs.

PU:I

This instrument bears similarities to the Ektara, although its playing technique resembles that of the violin. To craft the instrument, a bottle gourd is first dried. Then, a square-shaped opening is cut into the middle of the rounded upper part of the gourd and the soft inner portion is removed. A stick is then attached to it in a manner similar to the construction of an Ektara.

The string used in the Pu:i is made neither of aluminium nor iron but a special fibre known as Ga:ro Onno. It is played by finely cutting and shaping cane into a bow-like form, which is then pulled tightly and drawn gently across the string to create vibrations, much like in a violin. The tone is controlled with the fingers of the left hand. The sound produced while playing the instrument resembles “Pu:i–Pu:i,” from which it derives its name.

In earlier times, elderly members of Mising society during leisure would sing melancholic songs sitting in the front porch of their houses, known as the Tungong. Notably, the Pu:i was often played to ease the sorrow, trauma, and suffering from personal hardships, including separation and divorce. The following song reflects the sentiment:

Lop lop binamdem bilat kukuika
Tabab binamdim bilat kukuika
Do:nya tatteika po:la tatteika,
A:me okampé orbom Ka:langkn

KO:RÉG AND JEGRÉNG :

Ko:Rég is a string instrument named after its repeated mode of playing. Its main component is Seuwa kath, a type of wood, usually measuring about 1 to 1.5 inches in width and around 1.5 to 2 feet in length. The Seuwawood is finely carved in a ladder-like pattern.

When the upper part of the Ko:Rég is played using Sira:epang (toothed pig’s teeth), it produces a soft and plaintive sound. The instrument is used to harmonize with the melody and rhythm of Mising folk songs such as Kaban and other traditional songs. Jegréng is also played during celebrations of Ali-Aye-Ligang and Po:rag, important folk festivals of the Mising community.

GUNG-GANG AND GU : TIG

Gung-Gang and Gu:tig are significant among the wind folk instruments of the Mising community. Both instruments are similar to the Assamese traditional instrument Gogona and are played through the mouth. However, Gung-Gang and Gu:tig differ in their construction and playing techniques.

When Gung-Gang is played, sound is produced with the help of the movement of the finger. In contrast, Gu:tig is played by attaching a string to its head and pulling it rhythmically. It is believed that the melodies of both Gung-Gang and Gu:tig imitate the call of the Pigang (Hornbill). For example, while the hornbill’s call sounds like “Huwang Huwang Huwang,” the sounds produced by these instruments resemble:

- Gung-Gang Gung-Gang
- Gu:tung Gu:tung Gu:tung

In earlier times, Birina (Vetiver) plants and flowers were used in the making of Gung-Gang and Gu:tig. Among the Misings, this simple form was also known as Buku Baka. The stem of the Birina flower was placed in the mouth like a Gogona, wrapped around a smaller stem, and pulled back and forth to produce sounds such as “Buku Buku Baka Baka.” These materials are still used in the crafting of Gung-Gang and Gu:tig. While Gu:tig may still be made from Birina flowers or bamboo, it is generally played using a single string.

Gung-Gang and Gu:tig are commonly used in Gumrag songs and dances. However, in the present times, their use has gradually declined.

YOKSA SAPERÉNG :

The Yoksa Sapereng is a metallic instrument resembling a sword, made of metal and fixed to a wooden handle. Yoksa holds a special place in Mising society and culture. According to tradition, the Mising priest, known as the Mi’bu, performs the ritual dance called Mibu Dagnam while holding the Yoksa by its handle.

As the metal plates strike against one another, they produce a chiming rhythm sounding like “Saperéng Saperéng Saperéng,” while the Mi’bu sings sacred songs and dances at the centre of the line, surrounded by other dancers. This suggests that the Yoksa was originally used as a ritual instrument in auspicious ceremonies conducted by the Mi’bu.

LÉ:NONG :

In Mising society, it was customary to play the Lé:nong during times of crisis or disturbance in a household or the community, on the occasion of a death, and also to celebrate victory. Over time, it came to be recognized as an important folk instrument of the Mising people.

The method of playing the Lé:nong has distinct features. When someone in the village faced danger or difficulty, it produced a long, slow sound such as “Dong... Dong...”. A victory signal, however, was played in a faster rhythm like “Dong Dong Dong Dong.” In folk songs and dances, the instrument is played rhythmically in tune with the performance.

The chief material used in its construction is thick, flat, finely shaped iron. The instrument is made of metal in a disc-like form, with ear-shaped projections on both sides. These projections contain holes through which cloth ropes are attached, allowing the Lé:nong to be suspended while being played to produce a loud vibrating sound.

The stick used for playing the Lé:nong is generally made of bamboo or wood. A piece of cloth is tied around the head or front part of the one-foot-long stick to soften the impact while striking the instrument. Traditionally, the Lé:nong is used in three main contexts: during times of danger, as a signal of victory, and in folk songs and folk dances.

BARBANG :

Barbang is a disc-shaped instrument made of bamboo. It derives its name from the sound “Bar Bar” produced while playing it. There are two types of Barbang : one with a division and the other without a division. The instrument is played using a wooden or bamboo stick. Barbang is commonly used during festivals and ceremonies such as Ali-Aye-Ligang, Po:rag, and Midang.

ÉJUG TAPUNG :

One of the oldest wind instruments used in Mising culture is the Éjug Tapung. In the Mising language, éjug means “bottle gourd.”

The construction of Éjug Tapung requires a mature éjug (bottle gourd). The gourd is dried thoroughly and its inner contents are removed. About an inch near the stem portion is cut, and the base of the éjug is pierced to attach the Pi:li(rice straw) to the Pu:ré branch. The instrument is then played by blowing air through it.

Éjug Tapung is commonly used in sad or mournful folk songs such as Yamane Kaban and Tumbo Kaban. For example:

Ba:bo ba:ba
Ba:bunokke durgko okumé
Rongngamé Pesamé ba:bo ba:ba
(Tumbo Kaban)

This instrument closely resembles the pungi or bin, the traditional wind instrument commonly played by snake charmers in India.

Éjug Tapung are of three types :

- (a) Lí: Sig
- (b) Pumsu
- (c) Tumbo

Lí:Sig

The first type of Éjug Tapung is known as Lí:Sig. In the Mising language, Lí:Sig means “three-sided.” In this instrument, three bamboo tubes are attached to the éjug (bottle gourd). The éjug contains one hole at the top and two holes at the bottom; accordingly, one bamboo tube is connected to the upper hole and two tubes are connected to the lower holes.

Pumsu

The method of playing Pumsu Tapung is similar to that of Lí:Sig Tapung. However, Pumsu Tapung is believed to have been developed because of the complexity involved in playing the Lí:Sig Tapung. Its tonal pattern is expressed as follows:

Tangke Ke:nai Ke Ke
Ke:nai do:bai Ke Ke

Tumbo Tapung

Tumbo means “single” or “unpaired.” Tumbo Tapung is considered a simplified form of Pumsu. This instrument is associated with Nidyong (the seven musical notes) and can be used to accompany different tunes.

At present, Tumbo Tapung is also used in songs such as Oi Ni:tom and Anu Ni:tom.

Mising folk instruments are not merely tools of entertainment, they are representative of the beliefs, customs, rituals, and historical experiences of the people as a community. Many of these instruments are deeply associated with traditional practices such as the Mibu Abang, where music plays an important ritualistic and spiritual role. Over time, instruments once confined to ritual performances gradually became part of folk songs, dances, and festivals, thereby expanding their cultural significance.

The origins of several Mising folk instruments are also linked with folklore and oral traditions passed down through generations. Since the Misings were originally a hunter-gatherer community, their lives were closely connected with nature and hunting practices. Various hunting tools and weapons that were once used for survival were later transformed into musical instruments, carrying traces of the community's past within their forms and sounds. Hence, Mising folk instruments preserve elements of the social history and cultural memory of the Misings.

Another striking aspect of these instruments is the simplicity of their construction. Made mostly from easily available natural materials such as bamboo, wood, gourds, metal, and animal hide, the instruments reflect the intimate relationship between the Misings and their natural environment. Despite their simple structure, they possess distinctive tonal qualities and continue to play an essential role in the cultural and celebratory life of the Mising community.

Preserving the Rhythm

The Folk Instrument Tradition of the Hajongs

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Among the various Mongoloid tribes that have been living in Northeast India since ancient times, the Hajongs are one of them. It is said that the Hajongs migrated from Tibet and lived for several centuries in a region named Hajong, located on the Bhutan border to the north of Cooch Behar in North Bengal. In the subsequent phase, they dispersed to various parts of Assam. According to the recognition of the Indian Constitution, the Hajongs are a hill tribe; however, at present they are seen living not in high mountains but rather in the narrow plains of the lower parts of hilly regions and in the lowlying areas. The Hajongs used to live in the Goalpara district of the southwestern part of Lower Assam, in the western region of the undivided Garo Hills district of Meghalaya, and in the southern region of the Khasi Hills. But over time, they also spread to the Kamrup and Darrang districts



Regarding the origin of the name “Hajong”, various folk traditions exist. They are as follows:

- (a) It is said that the Hajongs used to work in muddy fields, sloshing around to produce crops, and because of this, their neighbours, the Garos, gave them the name “Hajong”. In the Garo language, the word “Hajong” means “soil insect” (ha = soil, jong = insect).
- (b) Another view holds that the word “Hajong” comes from the Bodo words Hagojo > Hajou or Hajo. The word Hajo means “high place”.
- (c) Some scholars have expressed a different opinion regarding the name of the Hajongs. According to Mr. Dalton, Reverend S. Endle, and Mr. B. Allen, the word “Hajong” originated from Haju in Bodo and Hasu in Rabha, combined with ong (meaning “inhabitants of a high peak”), or alternatively, from the Hojai Kacharis.

(d) Parashurama, son of Jamadagni, travelled across the entire earth and slaughtered the Kshatriyas, as a result of which Kartaviryarjuna was also killed. After Kartavirya Arjuna's death, his wife fled and came to live under the protection of the sage Kamadatta of Kamarupa (ancient Assam) of that time. In the sage's hermitage, she gave birth to a son named Padangsku. In due course, he became a king and brought the town of Hajo, including the Hayagriva Madhava temple, under his rule. During the reign of the last king of this dynasty, Bharata Varman, the kingdom of Hajo fell. Consequently, twelve thousand people settled in the Hazari region of the Garo Hills. Later, they came to be known as Hajongs.

The Hajongs are primarily an agricultural community. Being connected to an agriculture-centered social system, various festivals related to farming are observed in their society. An inseparable part of these folk festivals is folk musical instruments. Through this discussion, we will attempt to explore the folk instruments prevalent in Hajong society.

Folk Instruments

Folk instruments are those musical instruments traditionally associated with the festivals, dances, songs, and other cultural expressions of a community. The exact origins of these instruments such as their creators, place of origin, and period of development remain uncertain due to the lack of definitive historical evidence. Nevertheless, it is widely acknowledged that folk instruments emerged from rural societies. In Assam, a land characterized by its rich ethnic diversity, the tradition of folk instruments has a long and ancient history.

The musical instruments depicted in the sculptures, carvings, and reliefs found across various parts of Assam bear testimony to the antiquity of its instrumental tradition. Among the instruments represented in these ancient artistic forms are the horn (singa), conch (sankha), flute (bahi), khol (a double-headed drum), and cymbals (tal). These visual representations provide valuable insights into the musical culture of early Assam.

In addition to archaeological evidence, written literary sources also offer information about the musical instruments that have been in use in Assam since ancient times. In this regard, the references to various instruments found in Madhava Kandali's Saptakanda Ramayana serve as important testimony to the rich instrumental heritage of Assam:

*Veer dhak dhol baje tabala dagara dondi
Sawada suniya kolahol.
Bhemcha, kheimappa, choy, jhamar, rechami baje
Rama taal aru kara taal.*

(The dhol, dhak, tabla, dogor, dandi/ hearing their sounds, a tumult arises./The bhemcha, kheimappa, chaya, jhamar, rechami play/ the rama tal and kara tal also play.)

Furthermore, the Bishada Yoga chapter of Katha Gita by the 17th-century writer Bhattadeva, often hailed as the father of Assamese prose literature, contains descriptions of various musical instruments in its portrayal of the war festival of the Kuru warrior Bhishma. These references provide valuable insights into the instrumental traditions known in Assam during that period:

“Emone bohumanjukta bachan rajar suni mahapratapi kuruveer bheeshmerajakharish korite sarbapranir bhayankar singha Garjan sadrish mahanaad korila, uchchakori sankha bojaila. Emone senapoti bheesmor juddhotsav dekhi sakal thaitesankha, bheri, anaka, gomukha aadi nana badya bajaila, tar maha sabda bhoila.”

(Upon hearing the king's words of praise, the mighty Kuru warrior Bhishma, wishing to delight the king, emitted a resounding roar like that of a lion, striking fear into all beings, and blew his conch with a thunderous note. Seeing the war celebration of commander Bhishma, people everywhere played various instruments such as conches, bheri (kettledrums), anaka, gomukha and others, resulting in a tremendous reverberating sound.)

Similarly, Suryakhari Daivajna's 18th-century Darrang Raj Vamshawali (Chronicle of the Darrang Kings) provides a detailed account of musical instruments, their use and significance.:

*Sankha ghanata dhak dhol singa kali bheri
Jaya kali ram bena bajawe mahari
Khol karatal bawe nagara mridanga
Dotara sarinda bansi rabab upanga*

The above illuminates the ancient origins and continuous evolution of Assam's musical instrument tradition, a vital component of the region's cultural legacy.

Traditional Folk Instruments of the Hajongs

Like other communities living in Assam, the Hajongs are extremely rich in their tradition of folk instruments, the use of which can be seen in most of their folk events such as Sormaga, Lewatana, Jakhamara, Pawoni, Gopini Gahen, Rosi Gahen, and others. Below, the identification and construction methods of such folk instruments prevalent in Hajong society are discussed.

In Indian musicological tradition, musical instruments are generally classified into four principal categories. Following this classification, the folk musical instruments of the Hajong community can be grouped as follows:

(a)Membranophones:

Instruments made of wood, bamboo, clay, and metal, covered with animal hide, are called membranophones.

Dhuluk or Dhaki :

One type of membranophone prevalent in Hajong folk society is the Dhuluk or Dhaki. The use of this instrument is seen in various Hajong events such as Sormaga, Lewatana, Jakhamara, Pawoni, and others. The Dhuluk is made from the trunk of good timber trees like mango, jackfruit, and gomari (Gamhar). Typically, a 3 ft or 2.5 ft long with 2 ft diameter round piece of wood is hollowed out with a chisel. Both ends are then covered with animal hide, and the two hides are tightly tied with a leather strap (called Boroti).

Khol:

Another membranophone used in Hajong society is the Khol. The use of this instrument as a primary instrument is seen in dance and music performances such as Gitalu Gahen, Dhapa Kirtan, Rosi Gahen, Gupni Gahen, etc. To make a khol, the wood of the jackfruit tree is generally used. However, in ancient times, kohls were also made using clay pots. Both sides of the khol are covered with animal hide. An additional piece of hide, called Katoni sal, is used to hold the tali (the narrow part of the drum). Additionally, a leather cord, called Moluwa, is used to attach both the tali and the bajana (the playing side).

(b) Chordophones:

Instruments in which different musical notes are produced with the help of strings are called Tata Vadya/ Chordophones.

Dotara :

The dotara is a popular chordophone (string instrument) in Hajong society. It is commonly played during occasions such as Lewatana, Gopini Gahen, and other cultural events. The instrument is generally crafted from the wood of jackfruit, gomari (gamhar), chatiyana (Indian devil tree), and similar species.

In the construction of the instrument, a hollow resonating chamber measuring approximately five to six inches is carved at one end, while the other end is tapered to form a neck that can be comfortably held by hand. A slightly elongated rectangular opening is made along the neck, and four holes, two on each side are drilled to accommodate four tuning pegs. The opening of the resonating chamber is traditionally covered with monitor lizard skin. However, owing to the scarcity of monitor lizards today, goat skin is commonly used as a substitute.

Four fine strings are attached at one end of the instrument, stretched across the skin-covered resonator, and individually fastened to the tuning pegs at the other end. Small notched bridges are placed beneath the strings to maintain proper spacing, and the instrument is played by plucking the strings with a small wooden plectrum.

Sarinda :

The Sarinda is another important folk instrument of the Hajong society. It is constructed from a piece of wood approximately three feet long and nine inches wide, which is hollowed out to form the body of the instrument. About half of this hollowed section is covered with animal skin, creating the resonating chamber. At the upper end of the instrument, a small four-cornered opening is made, into which four tuning pegs, two on each side, are inserted.

Four strings are attached to these pegs and stretched down to the lower part of the instrument. The sarinda is played with a bow fitted with horsehair, which is drawn across the strings to produce sound.

Ros Madali :

This instrument is used in the songs associated with the spiritual ceremonies of the Hajongs. It is constructed from a bamboo tube approximately two feet in length, to which a hollow wooden resonator shaped like a gourd is attached. At the end of the bamboo opposite the resonator, a small hole is made near the tip, where a peg is inserted.

Khamak :

This instrument is made from a hollow wooden body, one end of which is completely covered with goat skin. The opposite end is only partially covered, leaving a circular opening at the centre. A small hole is made in the skin covering the fully enclosed end, through which a string is attached. The string passes through the hollow interior of the instrument and emerges through the opening at the other end.

A small piece of bamboo or wood is fastened to the free end of the string to facilitate gripping and tensioning. While playing, the instrument is held under the armpit, and the string is stretched with one hand. The player then strikes the string with a small wooden stick held in the other hand, producing a distinctive rhythmic sound.

Bena :

The Bena is a folk string instrument played during Hajong cultural events such as Rosi Gahen and Gupini Gahen. It is constructed from a coconut shell and a piece of wood or bamboo. The coconut shell is cut to approximately one-third of its original size and covered with animal skin to form a resonating chamber. A wooden or bamboo neck is attached to the resonator, and a hole is made at its upper end to accommodate a tuning peg.

A string is stretched from the resonator end, passing over the skin-covered surface, and is secured to the tuning peg at the opposite end. As in the case of the dotara, a two-legged fork-shaped bridge is placed beneath the string to maintain its proper height and tension. The Bena is played with a bow strung with horsehair, which is drawn across the string to produce sound.

Laotokara :

The Laotokara is a folk string instrument made from the shell of a mature bottle gourd. In its construction, the upper and lower portions of the gourd are cut open, and the inner pulp is removed. A piece of bamboo is attached to the gourd, with one of its nodes retained near the resonator, while the opposite end is split into two strips. A portion of the lower side of the gourd is left open and thinly covered with animal skin. A string is attached at the centre of the skin-covered surface and stretched upward to a tuning peg fixed at the unsplit end of the bamboo. The instrument is played by squeezing the bamboo with one hand to vary the tension of the string, while plucking the string with the fingers of the other hand. This technique produces a distinctive tonal effect characteristic of the instrument.

(c) Idiophones:

Instruments made of various metals are called Idiophones.

Ram Tal :

One idiophone found in Hajong society is the Ram Tal. It is used in folk dances and songs such as Lewatana, Jakhamara, and Bhanga Naoka etc. This instrument is made by cutting a long piece of wood. The middle section of the wood, about six to seven inches long, is hollowed out, and three metal rods are inserted into it. Small cymbals are attached to the rods, three or four on each. The instrument is held in one hand and struck against the palm of the other hand to play it.

Xamuk Tal :

This instrument is made by tying three or four pairs of snail (Xamuk) shells onto a bamboo peg. The shells are rubbed with a bamboo stick to produce various notes.

Taktaka :

The Taktaka is a folk percussion instrument found in Hajong society and is similar in form and construction to the Tokaused during Bihu in Assamese culture. It is made from a solid piece of bamboo with the nodes retained at both ends. The bamboo is cut slightly above one of the nodes, and both sides are gradually tapered to facilitate a comfortable grip.

The bamboo is then split lengthwise from the upper end down to the tapered section without completely separating it into two pieces. This construction enables the instrument to produce a sharp rhythmic sound when the split sections are struck together. The resulting instrument is known as the Taktaka.

The Taktaka is commonly used as an accompanying instrument in various folk dances and cultural performances of the Hajong community.

Dhama :

The Dhama is a folk instrument used in the auspicious ceremonies of the Hajongs. It is made of thin metal, like a Kahi (traditional metal plate), and is played by striking it with a stick.

Kachi :

The kachi is an instrument made of bell metal (kahar metal). It is used in Hajong society during auspicious ceremonies as well as in folk songs and dances. This instrument, made of flat bell metal, is played by striking it with a bamboo or wooden stick.

Jhuri Tal :

This tal is used in Hajong folk society during Maro Puja, Gitalu Gahen, Kirtan Gahen, as well as various other dances and songs. This instrument is equivalent to the traditional Assamese Khuti tal (a kind of cymbal).

In addition to the above instruments, the use of other idiophones such as kartal, ghila tal, dhapa kartal, and therthera is also seen in Hajong society.

(d) Aerophones / Wind Instruments:

Instruments that produce sound by blowing air through the mouth are called aerophones.

Gogona or Gobna :

One of the wind instruments prevalent in Hajong folk society is the Gogona or Gobna. Women of the Hajong community are seen using this instrument during various dance and music events such as Gopini Gahen and Rosi Gahen. This instrument, which is similar to the Gogona played during Bihu in Assam, is made from agoli (forepart) bamboo.

Rokhal Baahi or Xukh Baahi :

This wind instrument is called Xukh bashi (flute of happiness, Xukh meaning happiness) because cowherd boys play it to express joy while grazing cattle in the fields. Made of bamboo, this flute is the same as an ordinary flute. Just like the Xukh baahi, a dukh baahi (flute of sorrow) is also prevalent in Hajong society. The flute played by cowherd boys with a plaintive, sorrowful melody is called dukh baahi.

Khil Baahi or Dat Baahi :

Khil baahi is also an instrument mostly related to the cowherd boys. Khil baahi is a bamboo instrument played by blowing through a mouthpiece fitted with a wooden peg (khil). Although it looks like an ordinary flute, the blowing end does not have a notch or lip.

Sunga Baahi :

This flute has five or six finger holes, but the blowing end has no hole like an ordinary flute. This type of flute is called Sunga baahi because it resembles a hollow tube (Sunga).

Khanjari :

The Khanjari is one of the most widely used folk instruments in Hajong society and is commonly played during a variety of folk and cultural events. It consists of a circular wooden frame measuring approximately six to seven inches in diameter, with one side covered with animal skin to form a membrane. The frame is generally three to four inches deep, and a series of small holes are made around its rim. Through these holes, pairs of metal jingles are attached with pegs. When shaken or struck, the instrument produces a combination of rhythmic beats and jingling sounds, making it a popular accompanying instrument in Hajong musical performances.

Conclusion :

Folk instruments are embodiments of a society's folk culture. A community's love for music and artistic sensibilities are closely reflected in these instruments. Since ancient times, people have created the various rhythms and sounds of folk instruments by imitating natural phenomena such as thunder, the sound of swiftly flowing water, the rustling of tree branches and leaves, and the calls of birds. These instruments have

been performed in harmony with the rhythms and melodies of songs and dances presented during various rituals and ceremonies. Through traditions that have been passed down from generation to generation, they continue to be used in folk society even today.

The musical instruments prevalent in a society serve as important markers of its cultural identity. As representatives of a community's rich cultural heritage, they deserve careful attention in terms of preservation and promotion. The folk instruments of the Hajong community not only carry forward the cultural legacy of the Hajongs but also enrich the broader cultural heritage of Assam, thereby strengthening the foundations of Assamese composite culture. Therefore, it is the responsibility of all concerned to contribute to the preservation and promotion of these folk instruments, many of which are gradually disappearing amid the growing influence of modernity.

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Echoes of the Land

Folk instruments of the Dimasas

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The population flow in Northeast India can largely be determined by the concentration of various spoken languages in the region. The languages of the people of Mongoloid descent belong to the Sino-Tibetan language family. This root has two main branches: Tibeto-Burman, and Siam-Chinese or Tai-Chinese.

From the Tibeto-Burman part, three sub-branches emerged:

- a) the Tibeto-Himalayan,
- b) North Assam, and
- c) the Assam-Burmese branch

Many of the indigenous languages of Assam developed from the Assam-Burmese branch. Languages such as Dimasa and Hojai originated from the Boro-Kachari language of the Assam-Burmese branch. The Dimasas, who belong to the Tibeto-Burman linguistic group, are regarded as the true Bhumiputras (sons of the soil) of Assam. In the Dimasa language, the word Dimasa is composed of three elements: Di meaning water, Ma meaning great or enormous, and Sa meaning child. Thus, Dimasa literally translates to 'children of the great water bodies'.

The Dimasas ruled Dimapur between 1086 AD and 1536 AD. Following the shift of their capital, they ruled Maibang until 1745 AD and later Khaspur. The last Dimasa king, Gobindo Chandra, passed away in 1830 AD.

The historical presence and influence of the Dimasas are reflected in the names of many rivers across Northeast India. River names such as Dihing, Dibang, Dibru, Dikhou, Disang, Dikrang, Dipota, and Dihing retain the Dimasa root di, meaning 'water', bearing evidence to the community's enduring legacy in the region.

Civilisation forms the structural basis of society, while culture is the life force that animates it from within. Culture is an integrative force, making it difficult to isolate any single characteristic that defines it. Yet, it is through culture that the soul of a community or ethnic group finds its truest expression. In essence, culture remains an exclusively human inheritance. The doyen of Assamese culture, Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, once proclaimed, 'Man is the artist who turns dreams into reality.' In this spirit, folk culture manifests itself through the artistic sensibilities of the people and the boundless joy of creative fulfilment. It is the thread of folk culture that binds society together, making society itself the central force from which folk culture emerges, flourishes, and is nurtured.

Tradition is transmitted from one generation to the next, flowing through culture like a living document. It is through this continuous transmission of tradition that the histories of both primitive and civilised societies take shape. For this reason, the study of folk culture is often referred to as folkloristics, the scientific study of folk knowledge, traditions, and cultural expressions.

Within folk culture, the contribution of every individual member of society is of immense significance. Without the collective effort to preserve, practise, and transmit it, folk culture gradually fades into obscurity or loses its distinct identity. Folklorist A. R. Wright offered one of the most comprehensive definitions of folklore, describing it as the discipline concerned with the study of the mental and spiritual life, arts, recreation, oral literature, customs, rituals, and popular beliefs of ordinary people across all stages of human civilization.

Among the many components of folk culture, folk ceremonies and rituals occupy a central place. It is within these ceremonial spaces that folk arts find their fullest expression. Folk songs and dances constitute some of the most vibrant manifestations of this artistic tradition, often accompanied by the rich legacy of handcrafted folk musical instruments that have been preserved and passed down through generations.

For the Dimasa people, folk instruments are not merely tools of music, they are carriers of cultural memory. They are a part of worship, Dimabusu festival (akin to Bihu), romance, war, and rites of mourning. The use of distinct instruments for every occasion in their cultural life reflects not only the richness of Dimasa folk traditions, but also the deep reverence and creative sensibility that permeate their society.

The folk instruments used in various Dimasa ceremonies are:

- a) Muri
- b) Sufin (flute)
- c) Kharam
- d) Kharam Dabang



Muri is of three types:

- a. Muri
- b. Muri sha or Muri Wathisa
- c. Muri Ma

Sufin is also of three types, namely:

- a. Sufin Kebeng
- b. Sufin Kosong
- c. Sufin Jora

There are certain differences in the crafting techniques and traditions associated with Dimasa folk musical instruments in the hills and the plains. Based on these variations in instrument-making practices and cultural traditions, the Dimasas are broadly classified into four groups:

- The hill-dwelling Dimasas, known as Hasao.
- The plain-dwelling Dimasas, comprising the Demra, Dijua, and Hawar groups.

Since prehistoric times, the presence and cultural identity of the various ethnic communities of Assam have been expressed through their distinctive dances, songs, and accompanying folk musical instruments. In the study of musicology, musical instruments are broadly classified into four categories:

- a. Membranophone (instruments producing sound through the vibration of a stretched membrane or skin)
- b. Aerophone (wind instruments)
- c. Idiophone (instruments made of various metals, wood and bamboo)
- d. Chordophone (string instruments)

The folk musical instruments of the Dimasas may likewise be classified according to these categories:

- Aerophones: Muri, Muri Sha (or Wathisa), Muri Ma, and Sufin.
- Membranophones: Kharam.
- Idiophones: Kharam Dabang.

Muri

The Muri is a long wooden wind instrument played by blowing through the mouth. It accompanies almost all forms of Dimasa folk songs and dances and bears structural similarities to the Kali.

a) The Muri is played in a continuous breath (without changing breaths) through the mouth. In Dimasa, Mu means “eye” and Ri means “to give.” Accordingly, the instrument is traditionally said to be played with complete dedication, thus offering one’s heart and soul in it.

b) The Muri is crafted from a tree known as Bongkhlong. A distinctive feature of this tree is its naturally hollow inner core, which makes it particularly suitable for the construction of wind instruments like Muri. Owing to this characteristic, the wood can be easily shaped and fashioned into a Muri.

c) The central section of the instrument is known as the Muri. Based on its size, the instrument is further classified into two types: the larger variant is called Muri Ma, while the smaller variant is known as Muri Sha or Muri Wathisa.

d) The lower section of the instrument measures approximately 8 inches in length, the middle section about 12 inches, and the upper section around 5 inches. The mouthpiece or head attached at the top is generally less than half an inch in length.

e) The lower section of the instrument is known as the Muri Souga. The middle section, called the Yathai, contains six finger holes. In Dimasa, Ya means “finger” and Thai means “hole”; thus, Yathai refers to the section where musical notes are produced through the movement of the fingers over the holes. The upper section of the instrument is called the Sousa.

A ring made from a turtle shell is fixed approximately one inch below the top of the Sousa. This ring is carefully cut into a circular shape so that it fits snugly around the instrument. Inserted into the pointed tip of the Sousa is a small piece of rice stalk known as the Me-Bu. Since rice stalks are naturally hollow, they are particularly suitable for this purpose.

When air is blown into the Me-Bu, sound is generated and carried into the Sousa. From there, it passes into the Yathai, where the movement of the fingers over the six holes transforms the sound into melody. The holes are placed at intervals of approximately one inch, creating a space where rhythm, tempo, and musical syllables converge. Each hole measures about three-quarters of an inch in circumference.

The introductory notes played on the instrument are ga-gole, ga-gole, ga-gole. This melodic phrase is performed three times before transitioning into the main melody of the song.

The turtle-shell ring attached to the instrument is called the Muri Pakham. Its primary function is to keep the mouthpiece cool during performance and prevent it from becoming excessively hot. As the Muri is traditionally played continuously during extended ceremonies and festivities, at times for as long as seven days and seven nights, the Muri Pakham helps protect both the mouthpiece and the player's mouth from heat and swelling, thereby ensuring comfort during prolonged performances.

How to Play the Muri

The Muri gradually widens from top to bottom, with its lower end being considerably broader. Much like the flared bell of a modern wind instrument, this broad lower section helps amplify and project the sound, allowing the melody of the Muri to resonate clearly over a wide area.

To play the instrument, the performer places the mouth on the rice-stalk mouthpiece, known as the Me-Bu, and blows air into it. This action produces the initial sound, which enters the Sousa and then passes into the Yathai, the section containing six finger holes. By covering and uncovering these holes with the fingers in accordance with the desired notes, the player creates different melodies.

The resulting melody then travels through the Muri Souga, the lower section of the instrument, and emerges through its broad opening. This flared end enhances the resonance and volume of the sound, enabling the music of the Muri to produce its distinctive and far-reaching melody.

f) Crafting of this instrument is often associated with elders and culture bearers dedicated to preserving folk traditions. Such individuals devote themselves to the meticulous process of instrument-making, recognising its importance in safeguarding indigenous knowledge and cultural heritage for future generations. Since the craft requires considerable time, patience, and dedication, oral narratives suggest that it was often the Kania, or those regarded as "lazy" by society, who spent long hours sitting around the fire and crafting the instrument in a spirit of merriment and leisure.

g) Numerous folktales, folk songs, and proverbs are associated with the Muri, reflecting its deep cultural significance within Dimasa society. As a repository of traditional knowledge, artistic expression, and collective memory, the instrument undoubtedly deserves careful preservation and promotion for future generations.

h) The Muri is traditionally played during worship ceremonies, festive celebrations, and, according to oral traditions, in times of warfare. It is believed that when played during rituals and acts of worship, its sacred melody invokes divine blessings while warding off evil spirits and negative forces. Through its resonant sound, diseases, epidemics, and other misfortunes affecting society are believed to be dispelled, thereby ensuring the welfare and well-being of the community.

During festive occasions such as Bihu, the melody of the Muri is believed to awaken feelings of love, courtship, passion and desire among the youth.

When played in times of conflict, the Muri is said to inspire courage, determination, and steadfastness among warriors. Its powerful sound is believed to invigorate the warrior spirit, instill confidence, and encourage warriors to remain resolute on the battlefield.

The Dimasas perform the worship of Langlai to invoke rainfall, maintain peace and harmony in the land, and protect the community from diseases and misfortunes. It is believed that this ritual helps alleviate drought and brings the rainfall necessary for successful agricultural activities.

These cultural observances usually take place during the month of Bohag, a period marked by various social and traditional ceremonies among the Dimasas. The Muri occupies an important place in these celebrations and is played according to prescribed customs and rituals. Traditionally, after its ceremonial use during Bohag, the instrument is set aside and not played again until the following year.

i) The Muri is regarded as a sacred instrument by the Dimasa people and is therefore treated with great reverence. It is not handled casually or touched indiscriminately by members of the community. Before the instrument is played, holy water is traditionally sprinkled upon it as an act of ritual purification and respect. Traditional customs further prescribe certain restrictions regarding its use. According to these norms, individuals are expected to refrain from touching or playing the Muri after consuming certain foods considered ritually inappropriate, such as pork, snails, and crabs.

Traditionally, the Muri was played exclusively by men, and women were not permitted to perform. However, with time, changing social norms and cultural practices, these customary restrictions have gradually relaxed. Today, women play the Muri (the numbers are still less compared to men) during Bihu celebrations, although such performances are generally confined to domestic and community settings rather than public ceremonial occasions. This shift reflects the evolving nature of Dimasa society while maintaining respect for traditional cultural values.

Similarly, the earlier practice of playing the Muri exclusively during the month of Bohag has undergone significant change over time. Traditionally, the instrument was performed only during specific ritual and festive observances in Bohag and was thereafter set aside for the remainder of the year. In contemporary times, however, the Muri is played whenever the occasion or necessity arises. Nevertheless, the instrument continues to be preserved in a designated sacred space and maintained in accordance with traditional notions of ritual purity and reverence.

The Muri used in Buddhist temples bears a striking resemblance to the Muri played by the Dimasa community.

Muri Sha or Muri Wathisa

It is known as Muri Sha among the Dimasas of the plains and as Muri Wathisa among the Dimasas of the hills. It is comparatively smaller in size than the Muri. The term Sha means “small,” while Wathi refers to Murulibamboo, the particular species of bamboo from which the instrument is traditionally crafted.

Muri Sha or Muri Wathisa is made from the upper portion of the Muruli bamboo. Unlike the Muri, which is fashioned from wood, this instrument is crafted using sharp tools such as a dao (machete) or knife rather than through the application of fire. The instrument measures approximately one foot in length and is valued for its portability and distinctive sound.

Construction Process: The bamboo is first cut approximately half an inch below a node. The split section is then carefully scraped and shaped into a thin, tongue-like reed. About three inches below this reed, six finger holes are made. Both the reed and the holes are fashioned with a sharp knife. A distinctive feature of the Muri Sha or Muri Wathisa is that it is crafted entirely from a single piece of bamboo, demonstrating the ingenuity and skill of traditional Dimasa instrument makers.

Muri Sha or Muri Wathisa traditionally serves as a training instrument for beginners. Learners are expected to develop their basic skills and gain proficiency on this instrument before advancing to the Muri or Muri Ma.

Muri Ma

In its construction and design, the Muri Ma shares all the essential features of the Muri. The principal distinction lies in its size, as the Muri Ma is considerably longer, measuring approximately four feet in length.

While the rhythm produced by the Muri is generally fast-paced and lively, that of the Muri Ma is slower and more measured in character. Its sound is deep, resonant, and powerful.

Both the Muri and the Muri Ma are crafted entirely from wood and do not incorporate materials such as iron. In contrast, the Muri Sha or Muri Wathisa is made from bamboo. This distinction is rooted in traditional Dimasa beliefs, according to which natural materials such as bamboo, wood, and rice plants are regarded as sacred and ritually appropriate, whereas iron is considered unsuitable for the construction of these instruments.

The Muri Ma is also associated with a number of cultural beliefs and social functions. It is said that the melodies produced by the Muri family of instruments during Bihu create an amorous atmosphere, evoking feelings of romance, courtship, and attraction among participants. Consequently, these instruments have long been linked with expressions of love and social interaction among the youth.

According to oral tradition, a particular melody is played during Bihu celebrations when young men and women become weary after prolonged dancing. It is believed that this tune revitalises the dancers, restores their enthusiasm, and encourages them to rejoin the festivities with renewed energy and vigour.

SUFIN (FLUTE)

Sufin is the Dimasa term for the flute, and the instrument closely resembles the conventional bamboo flute in form and structure. It is crafted from Muruli bamboo and contains six finger holes. Its size and shape may vary according to the rhythm, tempo, melodic patterns, and musical requirements of the tunes to be performed. As a result, different varieties of Sufin are fashioned to suit specific musical contexts and performance traditions.

The Sufin is played on a variety of occasions, including religious observances, expressions of love and affection, and funeral ceremonies. It occupies a particularly significant place in Dimasa funerary customs. According to traditional practice, when a person passes away, the body is placed in the courtyard of the house before being carried to the cremation ground by members of the community. During this period, a distinctive melody is performed on the Sufin, expressing grief, remembrance, and respect for the deceased.

The instrument continues to be played as the body is carried around the funeral pyre at the cremation ground. Thereafter, a characteristic mournful tune is performed throughout the cremation rites until the ceremonies are completed.

Thus, the performance of the Sufin during funeral ceremonies constitutes an important social and cultural tradition among the Dimasa people, serving both as a musical expression of collective mourning and as a means of honouring the departed.

KHARAM

The Kharam is a distinctive drum instrument of the Dimasa community. According to traditional interpretation, Kha means “liver” and Ram refers to a soft sound, symbolising an instrument that is played with deep emotion, sincerity, and heartfelt expression. This long drum accompanies various Muri melodies and occupies an important place in Dimasa musical traditions.

The instrument is primarily crafted from wood, usually obtained from trees such as Gamhar and Neem. Animal hides also form an essential component of its construction. Deer and goat skins are used for the drumheads, while buffalo hide is employed to make the strong binding ropes that hold the instrument together.

Although certain variations exist in the construction of the Kharam among the hill and plains -Dimasas, the basic principles of craftsmanship remain largely the same. Among the plains Dimasas, the Kharam measures approximately 2.5 feet in length and about 3 feet in circumference. The left side, which is slightly smaller, is about one inch narrower than the right side. Thicker deerskin is stretched over the smaller drumhead, while thinner goatskin is used for the larger drumhead.

The two drumheads are fastened together with ropes made from buffalo hide, valued for their strength and durability. These binding ropes are known as Kharam Wadu. The diameter of the larger drumhead is approximately one foot, while the smaller drumhead measures about eleven inches in diameter. The central wooden body of the drum has a circumference of approximately three feet.

The larger drumhead is played with the right hand, while the smaller drumhead is played with the left. The larger side produces a deep and resonant tone, whereas the smaller side produces a softer and sharper sound. The leather components used in the instrument are collectively known as Mrigur.

In Dimasa tradition, the deerskin drumhead is associated with the term Dung-Dung-Fa, while the goatskin drumhead is associated with Jang-Jang-Di. The word Dung derives from Adung, meaning “younger brother,” and is associated with masculine qualities. Likewise, Jang derives from Ajang, meaning “younger sister,” and carries feminine associations. These symbolic designations reflect the cultural meanings attached to different parts of the instrument.

The manner in which the Kharam is played varies according to the occasion. During warfare and religious ceremonies, the smaller drumhead (Dung-Dung-Fa) is struck with a stick. During Bihu celebrations, however, both drumheads are played entirely by hand without the use of sticks.

The stick used for playing is fashioned from selected varieties of wood or bamboo. Not all trees are considered suitable for this purpose, as some are regarded as ritually impure. Consequently, only materials deemed appropriate within traditional belief systems are used in its construction.

The Kharam is played during Bihu celebrations, religious observances, and according to oral traditions, during times of warfare. Traditionally, the instrument is performed exclusively by men. Women do not participate in its performance.

Regarded as a sacred instrument, the Kharam is preserved in a designated holy space to protect it from ritual contamination. Traditional notions of purity and impurity are carefully observed in relation to the instrument, and customary rules governing its use, handling, and storage continue to be followed.

Special attire is also required when performing sacred instruments such as the Muri and Kharam. White garments are particularly preferred, for white is regarded as a symbol of purity and sacredness. Accordingly, musicians traditionally perform these instruments while wearing specially prepared ceremonial attire.

Among the Dimasas, women are traditionally skilled weavers and play a central role in producing these ceremonial garments within the household. Woven from Eri cotton yarn, such garments include the Rinchao (men's dhoti), turbans, and the Risa, a handwoven cloth worn around the neck, comparable in function to the Assamese Gamusa and also used to welcome guests. Women also weave garments such as the Rig, Rizomfai and Rikhaocha.

As these garments are intended for sacred and ceremonial use, their production is governed by customary rules concerning ritual purity. These traditions continue to be observed, and the garments are carefully woven, preserved, and worn during festivals, religious ceremonies, and other important cultural occasions.

Kharam Dabang

Although Kharam Dabang is classified as an idiophone in classical organology, its method of construction also allows it to be associated with the category of chordophones. The instrument is made from the stalks of Birina grass (*Vetiveria zizanioides*) and bamboo. The pith is removed from the Birina stalks, into which thin bamboo strips are inserted and woven in a mat-like (Koth) pattern to form the instrument. Sound is produced by moving the fingers across these stalks. The instrument is primarily played in accompaniment with the Muri Sha or Muri Wathisa.

For its construction, Birina grass stalks are cut into pieces approximately 1.5 feet in length. Around thirty such stalks may be used to make a single instrument. About two inches at both ends of each stalk are left intact, while the middle section is thinned by scraping it with a sharp knife. A total of sixteen bamboo strips are woven horizontally, eight on each side. In the middle section, four fine bamboo strips are woven at intervals of approximately two inches, with two positioned above and two below. These strips are inserted through the thinned portions of the Birina stalks.

From the central strips on one side, additional fine bamboo strips measuring about two inches are woven at intervals of four inches. Four such strips are woven above and below, followed by another eight fine strips, two at each end, arranged in a similar manner. Finally, the strips woven at the ends are tied together with thread, completing the construction process and making the instrument ready for performance.

Kharam Dabang is primarily played by practitioners of jhum (shifting) cultivation as a means of recreation and relief from fatigue while working in the fields. It is also played within the household to express joy on the arrival of guests. On such occasions, songs are performed alongside the instrument, conveying the host's happiness and extending a warm welcome to visitors. In this way, the instrument serves as an important medium for creating a pleasant and convivial atmosphere.

The instrument is also associated with courtship and the expression of affection. Traditionally played by young lovers during their meetings, it is believed to strengthen emotional bonds and facilitate the expression of feelings in a respectful and meaningful manner. Consequently, the instrument contributes to the creation of a harmonious and affectionate social environment.

One limitation of the Kharam Dabang is its relatively short lifespan. Since it is made from Birina grass stalks, the material gradually dries out and becomes brittle over time. As a result, the instrument generally remains usable for only about one year after its manufacture.

According to Dimasa oral tradition, instruments similar to the Kharam Dabang are found among several Kirat ethnic groups. In particular, it is noted that certain musical instruments used by the Dimal community of the Damak region of Nepal bear notable similarities in form and function to those used by the Dimasas, suggesting shared cultural elements among communities of the broader Himalayan and Northeastern cultural sphere.

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FOLK TRAILS

In the second edition of FOLK, we follow the trail of renowned ethnomusicologists and cultural archivists, Dr. Utpala Bora and Dr. Hans F. Utter from Ohio, USA, whose work has been dedicated to documenting and preserving the rich musical traditions of India.

Through their pioneering Musical Instruments Project, the duo has undertaken the important task of researching, documenting, and archiving the diverse folk musical instruments and musical heritage of Assam and the wider Northeast region. Their efforts not only help safeguard endangered cultural knowledge but also celebrate the stories, craftsmanship, and communities that continue to keep these traditions alive.

In this article, Dr. Bora and Dr. Utter reflect on the importance of preserving Northeast India's musical heritage and discuss how documentation, research, and community engagement can contribute to ensuring that these invaluable cultural traditions endure for generations to come.

Preserving NE's Musical Heritage

✍ Utpola Borah & Hans Utter

When we think of musical instruments, what pops into our minds? And why is it crucial for us to document and preserve our indigenous musical instruments? Many of us have grown up listening to, playing, or witnessing different kinds of instruments in various settings like our homes, neighbourhood temples, naamghars, churches, or even by street performers. But have we ever delved into their origins, construction, or history?

Often taken for granted, traditional musical instruments are not just mere objects but hold significant cultural importance. These instruments are deeply intertwined with cultural heritage, local materials, and the living traditions of musicians and instrument makers. The Musical Instruments Project aims to safeguard and celebrate the rich cultural heritage of Assam and the North-eastern region. Despite being a part of India, the Northeast boasts of a unique culture influenced by various ancient trade routes, including the Silk Route, which connected the region to East Asia, Middle East. and even Europe.

The project, titled 'Indigenous organology of Northeast India: Classification, documentation and preservation,' was officially launched in 2019 amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. The project is spearheaded by renowned experts Dr Utpola Borah and Dr Hans Utter. Dr Borah, an ethnomusicologist and music educator based in the USA, has extensively researched on the Bihu festival of Assam. Dr Utter, also based in the USA, has a background in ethnomusicology and has focused his research on the history and development of the sitar.



FOLK CULTURE RESEARCH CENTER OF NORTH EAST INDIA

Joining them in this endeavour is Dr Manashi Gogoi Dutta, a language and linguistics lecturer from Thailand, who is contributing her expertise on language and communities to the project. The initiative received a significant boost when Prof Ajanta Borgohain Rajkonwar, vice chancellor of Assam Women's University extended a helping hand by offering assistance in collecting musical instrument data through their Cultural Studies department.

The project was inaugurated in October 2022 with a one-day international symposium at Assam Women's University on 'Indigenous Percussion Instruments of Northeastern India: Collection, Preservation & Documentation'. This event garnered widespread interest and highlighted the importance of preserving the unique heritage of Northeast India. The region's rich musical tradition influenced by historical trade routes and local religious practices, presents a valuable cultural repository that deserves recognition and protection.

Through field trips and collaborations with local collectors and performers like Jogen Neog, the project aims to document and preserve traditional musical instruments before they are lost to time. Driven by the passion of individuals like Dr Utter, the team envisions a future where traditional music and instruments are not only recognised but also integrated into educational curricula and cultural preservation initiatives.

The project seeks to archive musical instruments, revive cultural practices, establish museums, promote tourism, create job opportunities, and reform education policies to ensure the survival of our traditional/indigenous musical heritage. With a focus on both documentation and preservation, this initiative aims to safeguard the rich musical legacy of Assam and the Northeastern region for generations to come.



FOLK MUSINGS

An indigenous Monpa folk artist and vocalist from Tawang, Arunachal Pradesh, Pema Tashi is a rare cultural custodian dedicated to preserving and promoting his community's rich cultural heritage. Through his work, he is creating a conscious cultural space while ensuring that traditional knowledge and artistic practices are passed down to younger generations.

His efforts in cultural preservation extend beyond performance to community engagement and cultural education. Among his most significant contributions is the compilation of Monpa folk songs, a rare and valuable initiative involving the systematic collection and documentation of songs that have traditionally been transmitted orally across generations. At a time when many indigenous traditions face the risk of fading away, his work serves as an important bridge between the past and the future.

In this exclusive edition of Folk Musings, Pema Tashi speaks with our editor about his deep love for folk traditions and the Dramyin, the Himalayan lute that he not only plays but has also crafted himself. A folk vocalist associated with the Monpa Institute of Performing Arts (MIPA), he taught himself the art of making the Dramyin by closely observing artisans at the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts and supplementing his learning through YouTube. His passion for the instrument reflects both his dedication to preserving traditional craftsmanship and his commitment to keeping Monpa folk traditions alive.

Throughout the conversation, he hums a few Monpa folk songs, melodies that celebrate nature, the land, and the people offering a glimpse into the soul of Monpa cultural traditions and the worldview of the community.

Pema Tashi's efforts in cultural preservation extend beyond performance to community engagement and cultural education. Among his most significant contributions is the compilation of Monpa folk songs, a rare and valuable initiative involving the systematic collection and documentation of songs that have traditionally been transmitted orally across generations.

His dedication stands as an inspiration to the role individuals can play in safeguarding indigenous heritage. Through his music, craftsmanship, and cultural advocacy, Pema Tashi is ensuring that the rich traditions of the Monpa people continue to thrive for generations to come.

PEMA TASHI

A Monpa Voice, A Folk way Forward



FOLK : We're delighted to share Folk Musings with you in the second edition of FOLK. To begin with, how would you define Folk ?

PEMA TASHI : For me, Folk is the beauty of life. As a folk artist, I see and feel the rhythm of our stories carried through culture across generations. Folk songs are the songs of the people—by the people and for the people. Nature itself is Folk. We have grown up listening to folk stories, and our songs speak of the stars, the moon, the sun, trees, flowers, birds, animals, culture, traditions, values, and everything that the universe encompasses. Folk is the art of life, and it is through these traditions that we keep that art alive.

FOLK: Can you tell us a little about yourself ?

Pema Tashi: I am a folk singer from Mukto village in Arunachal Pradesh, where I was born and continue to live. I teach and perform as a folk vocalist at the Monpa Institute of Performing Arts (MIPA). I have been teaching there since 2013. Over the years, I have also worked on preserving Monpa folk songs and have compiled 73 traditional songs in a book. I believe that while practice is important, preservation efforts are equally essential for future generations.

FOLK: What folk instrument do you play? Could you tell us a little about it ?

Pema Tashi: I play the Dramyin while singing. It is a traditional six-stringed Himalayan folk lute. In appearance, it resembles a blend of a guitar and a sitar. It produces a melodious sound and is primarily used in folk music. The Dramyin we play in our region is slightly different from the Bhutanese variety.

FOLK: Do you also craft the Dramyin ?

Pema Tashi: Yes, I have crafted two Dramyins so far. They are not for sale; I made them for my own use.

FOLK: Where did you learn to make them ?

Pema Tashi: By observing. I watched videos on YouTube and learned a great deal during my courses at the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts (TIPA). Those experiences encouraged me to try making one myself. Eventually, I crafted two on my own. They turned out quite well, almost perfect, if not completely so. But they are not for sale.

FOLK: What materials do you use?

Pema Tashi: I use wood sourced from the hills. The wood has to be soaked in water before it can be shaped and crafted into a Dramyin.

FOLK: You mentioned that you teach at the Monpa Institute of Performing Arts (MIPA). Tell us a little about the institution.

Pema Tashi: Yes, I teach there as a folk vocalist. MIPA stands for the Monpa Institute of Performing Arts. It is a pioneering institution dedicated to preserving, promoting, and showcasing the rich folk culture, music, and heritage of the Monpa community of Arunachal Pradesh. Established in 2018, MIPA has played a vital role in celebrating and presenting Monpa culture to wider audiences. Recently, a 16-member MIPA team performed at the annual Ladakh Festival in 2025.

FOLK: Does anyone else in your family play the Dramyin ?

Pema Tashi: No, I am the only one in my family who plays it.

FOLK: Do you play any other instruments ?

Pema Tashi: Dramyin is the only instrument I play.

FOLK: On what occasions is the Dramyin typically played?

Pema Tashi: It is played during various ceremonies and celebrations, including weddings. Many of our traditional folk songs, such as Rishung, feel incomplete without the sound of the Dramyin accompanying them.

FOLK: Can you tell us a little about the book of folk songs that you have compiled? How do you think it will help preserve the folk traditions of the Monpa people ?

Pema Tashi: Yes, I compiled a book titled Mon Rig Zhung Gi Ze Tsig Nging Pa Wang Poi Ga Ton, a collection of Monpa folk songs. The book contains 73 songs and is the result of extensive research, documentation, and years of effort. Collecting and compiling these songs into a single volume was not easy, but I am happy and proud to have contributed in my own way towards preserving our cultural heritage for future generations.

I believe the book will play an important role in safeguarding Monpa folk traditions. Today, much of our folk music survives through oral transmission, and there is always the risk of these songs being lost over time. By documenting them in written form, we can ensure that they are preserved and remain accessible to younger generations. The book is not just a collection of songs; it is a way of passing on our stories, values, and cultural memory to those who come after us.

FOLK: Could you explain a line or two from one of your folk songs ?

Pema Tashi: (Sings and explains) This particular song is about the Sixth Dalai Lama. An English translation of the original Monpa lyrics would read something like this:

“Oh, black-necked crane,
Lend me your wings—
I shall not wander afar,
Only return from Lethang.

Oh, nightingale bard, the more you sing,
The sweeter your voice becomes;
Oh, beautiful flower, the longer I gaze,
The more radiant your colours grow.”

FOLK: How do you view the future of folk music, and why is it important to preserve it for future generations ?

Pema Tashi: Folk music is not easy to sing. It requires continuous practice, but more importantly, it requires interest, passion, and a deep connection to understand its beauty. Folk music teaches us to appreciate the ordinary, to see the radiance in the world around us and the life that thrives within it. At MIPA, we are doing our part by teaching the younger generation. I hope they will carry these traditions forward and keep them alive for years to come.





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