



**International Research Journal of Interdisciplinary & Multidisciplinary Studies (IRJIMS)**

A Peer-Reviewed Monthly Research Journal

ISSN: 2394-7969 (Online), ISSN: 2394-7950 (Print)

ISJN: A4372-3144 (Online) ISJN: A4372-3145 (Print)

UGC Approved Journal (SL NO. 47520)

Volume-III, Issue-V, June 2017, Page No. 158-164

Published by: Scholar Publications, Karimganj, Assam, India, 788711

Website: <http://www.irjims.com>

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## **Traditional Musical Instruments of the Kukis of Manipur Paokhohao Haokip**

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### **Abstract**

*The Kukis are, by nature, a people who love music and it has been part of their cultural heritage. As such, music plays a very important role in the social and cultural life of the Kukis, and it is indispensable in all their festivals. It is used during merry making, good time, bad time, marriages, burial ceremonies etc. it is also used in communicating thoughts in poetic form to express love between a man and woman, happiness, sorrow, celebrations, victory over enemies in war etc. Hence, music is part and parcel of the life of the Kukis, who are also lovers of singing and dancing. For any occasion they would compose and sing songs. As such, in the traditional life of the Kukis, music and musical instruments play a significant role. The Kukis used to communicate with each other through songs played/sung with traditional musical instruments which were useful not only for raising the festive mood or spirit, but also for adding solemnity to certain various occasions. For this the Kukis developed their own traditional music system and musical instruments. As such, music and musical instruments are part and parcel of the Kuki traditional society. Musical instruments are of vital importance in the socio-religious and cultural life of the primal as well as today's Kuki society. These traditional materials are the living testimonies and aesthetic values inherited from their predecessors, which are of great cultural significance to the society. With this conceptual background this paper is to throw light on the important values and significances of materials among the Kukis in relation to their traditional musical instruments.*

**Key Words: Kukis, Music, musical instruments, traditional, cultural, significance.**

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**Introduction:** Music is one of the media of thought through which feelings, sentiments, emotions and ideas are expressed. Every occasion has its own music from cradle to tomb. It has been found, noticed, taken to be the satisfactory means of expressing from the deepest sorrow to the highest flight of love. There are songs of war, victory, joy, thrill, and gayety festival occasions. Music always has been the means of reaching the depths of the human heart when spoken or written words fail (Haokip, 2016:1). For Moerner, "Music speaks universal language and breaks across the barriers of race and colour" (Moerner, 1939:11). It unites,

binds and touches everyone. Thus, there is a renewed interest in music at times of excitement, pain, grief, frustration, loss, hate and love (Haokip, *ibid*). It is believed that Music is as old as the world. It was already present there in the universe. Over a period of many centuries, people all over the world have developed musical systems peculiar to themselves. Every nation and every tribe have their own style of music (*ibid*) and the Kukis are not exception to it. The Kukis are, by nature, a people who love music and it has been part of their cultural heritage. As such, music plays a very important role in the social and cultural life of the Kukis, and it is indispensable in all their festivals. It is used during merry making, good time, bad time, marriages, burial ceremonies etc. it is also used in communicating thoughts in poetic form to express love between a man and woman, happiness, sorrow, celebrations, victory over enemies in war etc. Hence, music is part and parcel of the life of the Kukis, who are also lovers of singing and dancing. For any occasion they would compose and sing songs. As such, in the traditional life of the Kukis, music and musical instruments play a significant role.

There are 'traditional music' as well as 'contemporary music'. Traditional Music normally designates the indigenous music of a people on a social context (Kreider, 2004, 9) while contemporary music is any music being written in the present day (Haokip, 2016:4-5). The Kukis used to communicate with each other through songs played/sung with traditional musical instruments which were useful not only for raising the festive mood or spirit, but also for adding solemnity to certain various occasions. For this the Kukis developed their own traditional music system and musical instruments. These traditional materials are the living testimonies and aesthetic values inherited from their predecessors, which are of great cultural significance to the society. With this conceptual background this paper is an attempt to investigate on the material culture of the Kukis in relation to their traditional musical instruments. The Kukis are found settling in Myanmar's Chindwin valley, Chin Hills State and Arrakan State on the Myanmar side; Manipur, Mizoram, Lower Assam, Nagaland, Tripura and Meghalaya on the Indian side; and Chittagong Hill Tract and Sylhet District of Bangladesh. Thus, the Kukis live at different places occupying huge geo-topographical areas of India, Bangladesh and Myanmar. However, the focus of this paper is limited to cover those of the so called Thadou speaking groups of the Kukis of Manipur. The method employed in this study is collection of data from primary sources through empirical studies as well as secondary sources.

**1. Traditional Musical Instruments of the Kukis and their Significances:** The traditional musical instruments which the Kukis have and are considered important and very much valued till today are as follows:

**1.1. Goshem:** *Goshem* is a bagpipe. It is a very important indigenous musical instrument played mainly by the men folk. It is made of a combination of gourd (dry local pumpkin) and bamboo tubes. (*Go*=bamboo, *shem*=blowing. Thus, *Goshem* means blowing bamboo). Seven pieces of hollow bamboo reeds of various lengths are inserted into the gourd; one, to serve as a mouthpiece, and the others, which are of various lengths, have small holes cut in them. The bamboo reeds are fixed with wax to one side of the gourd in two rows – four bamboo reeds

horizontally in the front and three vertically in the rear. The instrument is played by inhaling and exhaling. It produces seven different sounds while inhaling and another seven sounds while exhaling.

**1.1.1. Origin of Goshem:** Regarding the origin of this musical instrument called *Goshem*, a legend goes as follows:

Once, a man went to his field. He heard sounds of music from the outskirts of the field. Whenever he went to find out who played the music, the music used to stop. He went on doing the same to find out who really were playing the music. At last it came to his notice that the music was played by seven persons who were not real human beings, but ghosts. They were said to be seven brothers. Each of them was playing music by blowing a pipe which produced seven different sounds of music. On returning home, the man made seven bamboo pipes of the same type blown by the seven male ghosts. When the bamboo pipes were blown one by one, each of them produced the same sound of music played by the seven ghosts. Their father found it troublesome to blow the pipes one by one. Then, later on, for convenience the pipes were fixed together with a dry gourd which produced the same sound when blown. It is said that their father had a pain on the big toe of his feet. As such, whenever he blew the musical instrument, he would keep on raising his feet and putting it down on the floor while blowing the musical instrument. This practice is going on till today whenever a person blows this musical instrument.

In the traditional Kuki society, *Goshem* was significantly used as a means of communicating deep and melancholic thoughts between boys and girls specially lovers. It was used popularly for singing melancholic songs and for expressing desires to the lovers. It was used by boys through which, songs are sung by blowing it. The songs are used as means of communicating their deep thoughts and feelings to others particularly to their girl friends. The boys were used to communicating their deep thoughts and feelings through the music produced by blowing this musical instrument. Girls were usually weaving cloths at home. While a girl is engaged in weaving cloth, a boy would go to the girl; sit nearby and blow the musical instrument as a means of communication rather than talking to her verbally. Interestingly the girl comprehends what the boy says through playing music by blowing the instrument. If the boy holds the *goshem* in slanting position while visiting a girl, it symbolizes that he has a lover other than the one he is visiting. If he holds it upright position, it symbolizes that he has no lover by this time. Thus the girl could easily take her own judgement from *goshem* popularly used by the famous legendary heroes like Galngam, Ngambom, Nanglhun and Maneithangja. *Goshem* is also used for imitating the sound of convolutions of *Teo* and *Loh* rivers; the sound of Cock crows; a legendary hero by name Ngambom cutting the banyan tree branches; honey hunting bear; and wild boar's movements over the stream of the river (Singh, 1983:145-152).

It is said in a legend that a girl was holding a basket in her hand; and while the girl was doing so, the boy by way of music blown out of the instrument, commanded the basket to dance, and accordingly and interestingly the basket danced. Such was the thrilling power of

the music blown out of the musical instrument. Besides, the musical instrument was also used for other purposes such as singing folk songs; *heijam* sap ( a sound of commanding and thrilling people at work in the field.); for encouraging senior and junior *Lom* members (a group of working people or labour corps) and as a signal to the *Lom* members the time to set out for the work and also the time to return home after the work; and imitating the sound of the flapping wings of flying birds particularly of the hornbills which is considered an important and very much valued bird in the traditional Kuki society.

**1.2. Lhemlhei:** *Lhemlhei* is a peculiar mouth instrument. It is a Kuki indigenous musical instrument played by the women folk. It is made up of a piece of brass plates. A string of brass is made hollowed near the basal end. A string made of thread is inserted in it. A smaller piece is curved out in the middle of the stripe in such a way that except the basal part, the other sides are free from attachment to the main part. Another hole is made at the end of the middle piece and the string is inserted in it. This allows the vibration movement of the inner piece when it is pulled through the string. The random movement of the vibrating piece is converted into desirable sound by the tongue and the mouth (Meeting and conversation with elderly people of different villages. See also Guite, 2010:32-37 and Shaw, 1929:149-152). It is a musical instrument used for singing as well as communicating words between the lovers.

In the traditional life of the Kukis *Lhemlhei* was a musical instrument used and played mainly by the womenfolk especially by the girls to communicate with boys through music blown out of this musical instrument. It is used as a means of responding the boy who communicates with her through the music blown out of the musical instrument called *goshem*. When the boy talks to the girl through music by blowing *Goshem*, the girl would reply the boy with music by blowing her musical instrument called *Lhemlhei*. In this way boys and girls communicate with each other through music by blowing their own musical instruments. More than others, it is mostly used by lovers to communicate their deep melancholic thoughts and feelings for each other. Amazingly and interestingly boys and girls could comprehend the meaning of the music played through the musical instruments called *goshem* played by the boys and *lhemlhei* played by the girls. In this way, the lovers employed to communicate their feelings through *Goshem* and *Lhemlhei*.

**1.3. Theile:** *Theile* is a flute made of up of a bamboo tube. It has usually six holes. It has a base hole bigger than the rest, which is used for blowing; and the rest are used for controlling the sound so as to produce different tunes. *Theile* is used by the as communication of deep feelings between lovers. It is especially used by the boys in wooing the girls. At late night, they sing melancholic songs nearby the house of their love who could easily guess her lover even at a far off distance through listening to the tune of the sounding flute. It is especially used by the boys to communicate their deep feelings when they were deserted by their lovers. They blow the melancholic tune near their lover's house to show their despair towards their lovers. It was also generally played on the way to the field. In this way, *theile* (flute) serves as an important musical instrument in the traditional Kuki society.

**1.4. Changpol Kung Mut:** Changpol kung mut means playing music by blowing the stalk of paddy. The stalk of paddy, generally after harvest, is plucked and made into a simple instrument. Air is blown into the stalk by which certain music is produced. During harvesting, the cultivators - men, women and children would just play with the impoverished instrument at leisure time in the jhum as a means of recreation.

*Theile* (flute) and *changpol kung* (stalk of paddy) are types of Kuki indigenous musical instruments. Significantly, these instruments were also used as means of communicating deep and melancholic thoughts between boys and girls especially between lovers. Instead of communicating verbally, the boy expresses his melancholic thoughts and feelings to the girl through music played by blowing his *theilhe*. Then the girl, in turn, replies the boy through music by blowing her *changpol kung* (stalk of paddy). Amazingly and interestingly boys and girls could comprehend each other's thought and feelings communicated to each other through the music played by blowing their own musical instruments. Besides the use of these instruments by boys and girls, they are also generally played during harvesting - men, women and children alike would just play with the impoverished instrument at leisure time in the Jhum.

**1.5. Pengkul:** *Pengkul* is an indigenous traditional trumpet of the Kukis. It is made of rare species of bamboo called *Gotha*, and a mithun horn fixed at the one end through which the sound comes out when blown from the other end. The trumpet is blown with a loose lip, the mouthpiece kept being in position against the lips by holding the right hand round it and as near the end as possible, the thumb and the fore finger keeping in contact with the performer's mouth. In olden days this instrument was used as a means of indicating time table of the villagers' daily activities (bell or time table for the villagers which include time to rise, time to go to field and time to come back from the field). It was also used to welcome important persons and chiefs. Today it is used to welcome important persons such as Chief Guests at festivals and other important functions.

**1.6. Pheiphit/Theiphit:** *Pheiphit/theiphit* is a peculiar indigenous whistle of the kukis. It is made of a certain bamboo tube called *gotha*. The Kukis were fond of singing and dancing. There are different types of traditional dances in the Kuki society. A musical instrument called *pheiphit/theiphit* is played when a certain type of Kuki traditional dance called *sagol kengkhai lam* is performed by the *Lom* members. It is also used during the ceremonial ritual of paddy and animal.

**1.7. Khong:** *Khong* is the indigenous drum of the Kukis. It is usually of the skin of *sasan* (wild goat), cow, mithun etc. The manner in which it is made is simple; a big hollow is made from a typical kind of tree *vongthing*, and the skin of the animal is wrapped closed with cane so that air does not go out/ escape. A small piece of hole is made at the side of the drum. *Khong* is used to control the beating of folk songs, and is used while performing traditional dances. It is also used during great festivals like village *Lom* feast. There are different types of drums used by the Kuki; these include village *khongpi* (*Khongpi*=big/ large drum), the chief's *khongpi*, and the *Som* (dormitory) *khongpi*. The chief's drum is used for indicating

dangers or outbreaks of war. *Khong* is of two types: (i) *khongpi* (big drum) and (ii) *khongcha* (small drum). *Khong* is also exercised during the *Chang-ai* and *Solkho* festivals. On the outbreak of war or attack by foreign countries or enemies, the chief drum (*khongpi*) is used. Today (after the coming of Christianity to the Kukis) drum has become an essential element in church worship. It gives correct beating to the song and helps the congregation to sing correctly.

**1.8. Dah:** *Dah* is a Kuki indigenous gong. It is made of huge mass of brass with a ball-like circle bulging out at the centre on which the beating of the gong is done to produce sound. When it is beaten, it produces a loud and long vibrating sound. It is played/ used at the time of festivals, death, village meetings and on rituals. It is also used as one of the items of bride price at the time of marriage, and as a fine of divorce. There are different types of gongs which are highly valued and the number of this possession estimates wealth of a person in the society.

**1.8.1. Dahpi:** The biggest of the gongs is called *Dahpi* (Large/ big gong). They vary in size from six to ten spans of finger in circumference. It is used in all occasions in the society.

**1.8.2. Dahbu:** It consists of three gongs of equal size and about 30 centimeters in diameter, each with a separate note, on which three skilled performers can produce resembling a tune called *dahbu*. It is used on important occasions of the society.

**1.8.3. Dahcha:** It is a small gong used in occasional traditional dances.

**1.9. Selangdah:** *Selangdah* or guitar is a traditional musical instrument played with six strings. This has been in use from generations. It is made of typical wood called *Vongthing* and is used (played) mostly by youths to sing songs. There is also a small type of *selangdah* called *Mendaling* used in the same way. There was also an indigenous guitar made from bamboo. A node of bamboo having its notes at both ends is used. About three or four strings are curved out of the bamboo and shaped like the strings of the modern guitar. These strings are stretched tightly by inserting some pieces of bamboo or wood below the strings. It is then played like a guitar and is used on any occasion of singing which suits or adds harmony to the songs sung.

**1.10. Selki:** It is the horn of mithun (*Sel*=mithun, *Ki*=horn). It is struck with stick to back up the sound affect of drums and gongs. It is rhythmically used to strike notes. The Kukis were used to drinking a certain type of traditional wine called *jukha* and selki was used as a cup for drinking that wine.

**Conclusion:** As highlighted in the above discussion it can be concluded that music and musical instruments are part and parcel of the Kuki traditional society. Musical instruments are of vital importance in the socio-religious and cultural life of the primal as well as today's Kuki society. With the changes in the kuki society today brought about by modernization accompanied with the coming of Christianity there has been some changes or modifications in the forms and uses of the different/various traditional musical instruments. Nevertheless

the aesthetic values and importance of music and musical instruments still continues and plays important part in the socio-religious and cultural life in the kuki society.

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