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# Traditional Knowledge of the Musical Instruments used by the Mising (Miri) Tribe of Assam

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## ABSTRACT

*Assam in the north-east India has traditionally been home to diverse ethnic tribes dwelling in harmony enriched with heritage of culture, which contributed immensely to its musical gamut. Of which the Mising tribe have brought with themselves unique art forms, rich cultural heritage, diverse food habits, socio-religious rituals, customs and festivals. Traditionally this community have their own unique traditional folklores and music passed down orally from generation to generation through the beliefs and customs of ordinary people of this community. The number of musical instruments used by the Misings are not any less in numbers out of which Pempa, Ejug Tapung, Gunggang, Pi:li, Bu:bung are some woodwind instruments, whereas Dumdum, Lu:pi, Dentug, Marbang, Dendun, Dumpak are few beat instruments and with some lesser known instruments such as Kokter Toka, Mibuigosa, Deoghanta, Le:nong etc. All these sets of musical instruments represent various form of traditional songs accompanied with folk dance. These musical instruments are generally made of local materials such as bamboo, wood, few with metal brass, round gourd and animal skin. Most importantly, the tribe people use these traditional instruments in almost all the festivals like Ali aye ligang, Po-rag, Midang (marriage ceremony), Biu (Bihu) celebrations etc., for they are considered to be inseparable component of their rites. Therefore, this paper focus on the musical interest of the Mising tribe of Assam emphasizing the importance of these musical instruments to their culture.*

**Keywords:** *Mising tribe, culture, music, materials, musical instruments.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Mising tribe are a race of Mongolian people who are described to be occupying the hills and vales of North-Eastern India both Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. They were also known as 'Miri' in the past and still recognized as the same under the Constitution of India. They constitute the second largest tribal group of Assam in terms of population. The Misings claims themselves to be of Tani origin, a branch of the Sino-Tibetan family and believe that they were

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the offspring of Abo Tani, a legendary father of mankind, just like the other Tani tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. Around 13<sup>th</sup> century, the Mising tribe is said to have come down to the plains of Assam. Traditionally this community have brought with themselves unique art forms enriched with moral values and endowed with rich cultural heritage, diverse food habits, mythological faith, folk tales and socio-religious rituals, customs and festivals. Most importantly in term of festivals the Misings perform their traditional folk dance and music using traditional musical instruments in almost all the festivals like *Ali aye ligang*, *Po-rag*, *Midang* (marriage ceremony), *Biu* (Bihu) celebrations etc., for they are considered to be inseparable component of their rites. Thus, these musical instruments play a very crucial role in shaping the cultural diversity of the Mising tribe.

Music and instruments are deeply connected for they together convey emotion, generate vibration and fetch peace of mind to the listener and above all helps in social cohesion on both personal and communal level. The Mising tribe have lots of folklore and music in oral tradition relating to different musical instruments which tell as to how these instruments are used differently in different festivals and ceremonies. However, there is no any written documents which describe in detail how those musical instruments did originate. Interestingly, all of these instruments are very uncommon in size and structure in comparison to the other musical instruments of north-east India. These are generally manufactured by themselves with the most locally found materials like bamboo and wood, very few with hollow round bottle gourds and animal skin, and some of them are made of brass metals also. These musical instruments are available in the society, of which few very common instruments made of bamboo and wood materials are easily found or kept as a showcase in a household. From a long period of time, all these handmade musical instruments are preserved by the Mising tribe and therefore, are worth mentioning because of their different shapes and sizes and unique technique to produce sounds.

## II. TRADITIONAL MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS OF THE MISING TRIBE

The Mising community have rich folk music. Apart from some usual musical instruments such as *dumdum*, *lupi*, *marbang*, *le:nong* etc., used in ‘Gumrag’ dance common to other locals, there are some typical type of traditional instruments played in Mising folk music such as *ejuk tapung*, *derki tapung*, *tumbo tapung*, *tutok tapung*, *dendun*, *tulung* etc. All these musical instruments are used in folk songs, sung by Mising youths during festival celebration, ritual ceremonies, when they are working or moving about the fields, woods etc. It is an integral part of the Mising soman (dance) and each has its particular rules. Based on the different technique

to produce sounds all these musical instruments are categorized under different section such as:

**(A) Beat (Percussion) Instruments:**

The beat instruments known as '*demna or di:la mannam*' in Mising culture are the most commonly used musical instruments. It is said that before making of any kind of musical instruments the people in the past used to dance and sing songs by producing sound through hitting in the mud with hands. Later, it changes to beating small bamboo and wooden pieces which slowly took the shape of instrument. Likewise, this traditional beat instruments first came into use in the Mising culture from the past till the present time. These are listed below:

***Dumpag:***

It is made of bamboo about 18 inches long which looks like a cylindrical tube with one side open and keeping the node or joint in between the other side is closed. Then a small hole is made on the middle of node and is slightly peeled on which the played beats with stick to produce sound. This instrument is mostly played by the cowherds in the fields and also used in festivals.

***Dentulung:***

This instrument is also made of bamboo which looks like cylindrical tube but here both the sides are kept open. It makes sounds like '*dentulung dentulung*' while strike by stick, so the instrument is named as *dentulung*. It is usually played by children's or boys while working in the fields.

***Dendun:***

It is the simplest musical instrument made of bamboo in a cylindrical shape with one end closed by the joint and the other end opens. It is simply beaten by the stick to produce sound.

***Dentug:***

This is a string instrument made of bamboo. For making this instrument, a bamboo is cut into a closed cylindrical tube keeping the joints or nodes on both sides. Then the surface is smoothly peeled and on both side is cut out like a string through which two sticks are inserted. To produce sound the player beat a stick upon the string made on the peeled surface.

***Le:nong:***

This musical instrument is made of metal in disc shape that has ear like structure above both the metal plates. This ear like structure has holes through which cloth ropes are attached to

suspend and wrap the *le:nong* to produce loud vibrating sound when played. In the past, *le:nong* was especially played to inform about a person's death in the Mising culture. It is said that when a person is dead, one member goes to the house roof and plays the *le:nong* loudly to inform the relatives and peoples so that they can come to the deceased house.

### ***Marbang:***

Just like the *le:nong*, *marbang* is also an metal instrument made in disc shape and with rope cloths bang against each other to produce sounds.

In the Mising culture both *le:nong* and *marbang* are precious instrument that are considered to be heirloom property. Both are played in special occasion like religious ceremonies, *kebang*, *gumraag* dance etc., are mention worthy.

### ***Lu:pi:***

The Misings use another kind of rhythmic instrument called *lu:pi*. The size of this instrument varies from around ½ kg to a whopping 3 kg. It is made of metal into a disc's shape that produce sound when bang against each other. Because of it systematic rhythms and chirming sound, *lu:pi* is mostly accompanied with *dumdum* during the dance performance that cheer the youngsters in celebrating the festivals through music in the Mising culture.

### ***Koktar Toka:***

For making this instrument, a cylindrical bamboo with a cork at one end is cut into two halves from the other opening side which make sounds when strikes against each other. Women use *koktar toka* and hand clapping alternatively to keep the track of beats while performing the *soman* (dance) in the Mising culture.

### ***Dumdum:***

In comparison to all the musical instruments used by the Mising tribe, the use of '*dumdum*' came much later in the Mising culture. It is believed that, there was no use of '*dumdum*' by the Mising tribe in the past, it was only after their migration into the plains of Assam this instrument was used as a musical instrument. It is made of a wooden barrel which is hollowed from inside keeping the both ends open upon which animal skin is stretched over to completely cover them. The sound frequency of the *dumdum* totally depends on the tightening and loosening of the skin. Though, this instrument came later it is the most commonly used musical instrument during any festivals, ceremonies or rituals for its harmonies well with all the other musical instruments.

## **(B) Wind Instruments**

The Mising society has long valued wind instruments (*mudla mannam*) and has the most of it in comparison to the other musical instruments, from their earliest use in rituals to making different types of it to the present day. Certain wind instruments are closely associated with hunting, festivals, rituals and their sounds connote powerful magic to the listeners. The Mising community likewise has different kind of wind instrument made of local materials such as:

### ***Ejug Tapung:***

*Ejug tapung* is the oldest musical instrument among the other wind instrument in the Mising culture. This instrument is made from one kind of wild round bottle gourd known as ‘*ejug*’ in Mising language. It is said that the Mising tribe traditionally used the casket of *ejug* (bottle gourd) as a container to scale rice, water, *apong* (rice wine) etc., in the past. In order to make *ejug tapung*, firstly, a matured bottle gourd is plucked from the tree and kept on the smoke self of the kitchen to dry. A few days later when the gourd is totally dried, the stem section is then made into a hole and the seeds are carefully removed from inside the gourd. Next a sort of flute made of bamboo is fixed to the bottle gourd. This instrument looks similar to the ‘*pungi or bin*’, a wind instrument played by snake charmers in India. The *ejug tapung* is of three types such as:

### ***Tumbo Tapung, Pumsu Tapung and Li:sig Tapung:***

*Ejug tapung* with one prong is called as *tumbo tapung*. To make this instrument a single flute made of bamboo is fixed to the dried bottle gourd. The flute has six specially shaped opening through which sound is produce. The *pumsu tapung* is known for its two-prong opening where flutes are fixed. It has a total of 4 embouchures, two towards the downside of each flute which produce sound. Whereas the *li:sig tapung* has three prongs openings with 5 embouchures to produce sound. For making this third instrument, first two flutes with two holes each is fixed towards the downside of the dried gourd and then the third flute with one hole is fixed in a 45-degree angle towards the upside of the same gourd. All these three types of *ejug tapung* are used in folk songs such as *kaban* (songs of lamentation), *selloi nitom* (merry-making songs), *lereli nitom* (sheer songs sung while meeting old friends) etc.

### ***Derki Tapung:***

Likewise, *derki tapung* is a sort of flute made of a special kind of bamboo. For making this instrument, it is commonly carved out of a single piece of bamboo around 1.5 feet long in a tubular shape and six specially shaped opening (known as the embouchure) are made at the end of the tube through which the artisan blow in such a way as to produce a vibrating column of

air whose pulsations is heard as sound.

***Tu:tog Tapung:***

The *tu:tog tapung* is another important musical instrument same as *derki tapung*, curved out of a single piece of bamboo into 14 inches length with a cork-lined blow-holes that produces its sound from the flow of air across those openings when played horizontally. Both the *derki tapung* and *tu:tog tapung* is played in their folk songs till the present days.

***Jegreng Tapung:***

*Jegreng* is another wind instrument made partly of bamboo and partly of buffalo horn just like the '*pepa*', particularly used during the Gumrag dance in the Mising culture. To make it, the horn of buffalo is first kept immersed in warm water or cow dungs for softening. After some days the tip of the buffalo horn is cut and is fitted to a piece of cylindrical reed of bamboo about 15cm long. The horn end widely opens up like a cone and when the player blows by placing the mouth towards the bamboo ends, it produces sounds. It is used to welcome the bride and groom and to facilitate some special guests. However, being in culture from a long period of time this instrument has become lesser known in present time.

***Tu:lung:***

It is a single blowing instrument with a wooden frame body made of bamboo just like a cylindrical tube. In the past it was also made of buffalo and mithun horns. In the Mising culture it is believed that when a person becomes unconscious due to chronic illness, the loud sound of this instrument brings back the person into conscious. It was also played to inform the village people about the enemy's attack or before wars. However, this instrument has become lesser known in the present time.

***Dumpe:***

Another indigenous musical instrument of the Mising community is '*dumpe*' usually used by the hunters to lure the wild animals and birds while hunting in the forests. It is made from the leaf of a shrub known as '*tokam agleng*' in Mising language. For making it, the leaf is rolled in a special way and while doing it one end is kept smaller to put into the mouth to blow. When blown the instrument produces a sort of sound which attracted the hunts in the forest.

***Gunggang:***

It is a vibrating reed instrument curved out of a bamboo piece that has a bifurcation on one end. This instrument is played by the women and generally tucked into a hair knot while performing the dance during the festivals.

***Bu:bung:***

The *bu:bung* is used together with the drum during the Mising dances and it is believed that if one plays this instrument it will rain. For making this instrument, a bamboo about 8 to 10 inches long is first peeled into a thinner size and then a thread of eri silk is tightly tied to one end of the instrument. When played makes “*bu:bung*” sound for which the instrument is called as *bu:bung* in the Mising culture.

***Pi:li:***

It is the smallest musical blowing instrument which is of three types both known as *pi:li*. Two types are made out from a tree branch about 2 inches long, which one is played only by fixing it to another instrument known as *jegreng tapung* during festivals, whereas the other one is usually played by boys while looking after their cows in the field. The third type *pi:li* is made from the stem of a rice plant about 1 cm length mostly played by the children.

**(C) Other Instruments**

These musical instruments known as ‘*Gilugiyar*’ are played only by mixed form combining with other musical instruments. This are generally hardly use only during some rituals or ceremonies which make it lesser known to the Mising youth and likely to be lost in the present time. All these instruments vary from each other which are made of different materials and have different technique to produce sound. Such as:

***Yoksa Sapereng:***

The *yoksa sapereng* is a sort of metallic sword made of metal fixed to a wooden handle. It is about 25 to 30 inches long with a sharp edge and metal feather-like ring plates are attached to the instrument only used by priest or shaman of the Mising tribe known as Mi’bu. According to the tradition, the Mi’bu perform the ritual dance known as ‘*Mibu dagnam*’ holding the *yoksa* by the handle and when the plates strike each other to produce a chiming rhythm, the priest sing the auspicious song (*ahbangs*) and dance standing in the middle of the line surrounded by three or four other dancers who are selected from amongst the spectators. While performing the dance the Mi’bu wears a loin-cloth, a short-sleeved coat, along with a metallic sword slung on the right side and a leather bag slung on the left side, a few bead (*dogne*) necklaces and few other articles. There is no definite myth about the origin of this ritual dance performed with ‘*yoksa sapereng*’ instrument however, it has been there in the Mising culture since the past and is considered as a sacred which is preserved by the community. Therefore, the sword of the Mi’bu is also categorized under musical instrument.

***Raiko:reg:***

It is an indigenous musical instrument of the Mising tribe which is hardly known to the present generation. This wooden instrument is curved out of a betel nut tree into a smooth piece. Then some small cuts are made on the smooth surface upon which a tooth from wild pig or boar is rubbed that produce vibrating sounds.

***Deoghanta:***

From a long period of time, the *deoghanta* has also been present in the Mising culture as a musical instrument used by the Mi'bu (priest) of the Mising tribe on the commencement of an event or to sing of the wellbeing of a family. This instrument is also played in a ritual praying for the recovery of a victim from the evil spirit while the Mi'bu recites "Yal" auspicious songs to achieves relief. This is why the *deoghanta* is considered to be another musical instrument of the Mising community.

***Kekung:***

It is a string instrument. The body is curved out of wood upon which few pieces of corks are strategically attached to keep the string tight and suspended and the base is made from the shells of coconut or bamboo. Then a silk string is attached to the body which when struck with a chip from horseshoe produces vibrating sounds.

***Ramtaal:***

This instrument is also known as kortaal and are generally use in the religious rituals by the Mising priest. It is a cylindrical halved bamboo blocks that are strike against each other to produce sound. The *ramtaal* is usually played as an alternative to both clapping of hands and to keep track of the beats.

**III. CONCLUSION**

From the discussion it is seen that the cultural heritage of the Mising tribe is enriched with various traditional instrument which are the ancestral root of their identity. Not only the shapes and sizes but also the unique sounds of these traditional instruments are rich in symbolism. These traditional instruments have gone through the phases of evolution. They have changed according to the time and place depending on different styles on playing them. Unfortunately, the traditional musical instruments of the Mising community are fading out for want of artisans to make them and artisans to play them. Therefore, regarding the root's traditions of the Mising community which prevailed earlier, some of those musical instruments have gone into disuse due to changing times and lifestyles. It is not that these traditional musical instruments have

lost, but they have an exceptional spot in the culture of Mising community of Assam.

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