



## TRADITIONAL MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS OF THE MEITEIS: A HISTORICAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

**Dr. Soibam Athoiba Singh**

**Department of Ancient History and Archaeology, Manipur University.**

**Prof. Oinam Ranjit Singh**

**Head, Department of Ancient History and Archaeology, Manipur University.**

### ABSTRACT

The traditional musical instruments of the Meiteis of Manipur constitute an important component of the region's indigenous technological and cultural heritage. This paper examines their historical development, construction, functions and cultural significance through an analysis of Meitei literary traditions, royal chronicles and secondary sources, supplemented by observations of surviving instruments and contemporary practices. Texts such as the Ningthourol Lambuba, Cheitharol Kumbaba, Poireiton Khunthok, Loiyamba Shinyen and Moirang Shaiyon indicate the use of instruments including the pena, pung, moibung, tharaochi, toudri, sembung and sharik in courtly ceremonies, warfare, communication and religious practices. The study classifies these instruments into aerophones, membranophones, idiophones and chordophones and examines the indigenous knowledge involved in their manufacture using wood, bamboo, reed, animal hide, metal and plant materials. It argues that these instruments functioned beyond musical performance as instruments of communication, markers of political authority and repositories of ritual and community identity. Their continued use in practices such as Lai Haraoba demonstrates the resilience and adaptability of Meitei traditional knowledge. The study highlights the need to document and preserve this important aspect of Manipur's material and intangible cultural heritage.



**KEYWORDS:** *Meiteis, traditional musical instruments, Pung, Pena, traditional technology, cultural heritage.*

### INTRODUCTION

The history of musical instruments dates back to the pre-historic period of mankind, when naturally available materials such as bone, wood, stone, shells and animal horns were fashioned to produce sound. These objects served practical and social purposes such as they could signal the presence of people, accompany collective labour, mark ritual occasions, associate dance and create forms of entertainment. As communities acquired greater control over materials and techniques, simple sound-producing objects developed into instruments with more regular shapes, specialised components and culturally recognised modes of performance. The history of musical instruments is therefore not only a history of music but also reflects a history of material selection, craft knowledge, technological experimentation and social organisation. In the Indian subcontinent, textual evidence

from the later Vedic tradition refers to drums, cymbals or *aghati*, conches, flutes, lutes and the large-stringed harp or lyre known as *vana*, illustrating the diversity of instrumental forms in early Indian musical culture (Singh, 2009, p. 199).

Within this wider South Asian context, the traditional musical instruments of the Meiteis of Manipur offer an important field for historical study. They combine locally available organic materials - wood, bamboo, reed, gourd, leather, plant fibre and animal hair - with metals and shells, demonstrating a close relationship between musical practice and the material environment. Their uses also extend beyond aesthetic performance. Instruments have functioned in courtly processions, warfare, communication, agriculture, village institutions, dance, festivals and ritual practice. Consequently, an examination of Meitei instruments can illuminate not merely the development of musical forms but also changing patterns of technology, political authority, religious practice and community life.

### Research Gaps

Existing studies have largely focused on Meitei musical instruments from folkloric, ethnographic and cultural perspectives, with limited attention to their historical and technological dimensions. The evolution of instruments, indigenous manufacturing knowledge and their changing social, political and ritual functions remain insufficiently explored. This study addresses these gaps by examining musical instruments within a broader historical and material-cultural framework.

### METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a historical and descriptive-analytical approach. It incorporates primary sources comprising Meitei historical texts and archaic literature such as the *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, *Ningthourol Lambuba*, *Naotheringkhong Phambal Kaba*, etc. as well as secondary sources. It examines the musical instruments in terms of their historical development, materials, construction techniques, uses and cultural significance.

### Objectives

The objectives of the study are -

1. To trace the historical development and changing forms of traditional musical instruments among the Meiteis of Manipur.
2. To examine the materials, indigenous techniques and technological knowledge involved in the manufacture of these instruments.
3. To analyse the social, political and ritual functions of traditional musical instruments in the Meitei society.

### DISCUSSION

Meitei textual traditions contain a number of references to various musical instruments. These accounts must be analysed as historical and cultural sources rather than interpreted as chronological records. The *pena*, for example, is associated with the reign of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba (33 – 154 AD) and with the court singer Leinung Tharuk Asheiba as suggested in the *Ningthourol Lambuba* (Bhogeshwar, 1967, p. 2). This indicates the existence of the instrument in Meitei society since the early period. The references to the *pung* and *moibung* also occur in early Meitei literary and historical traditions. *Poireiton Khunthok* describes the use of *pung* and *moibung* during the time of Poireiton in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD (Chandra, 1979, pp. 18–21), while *Panthoibi Khonggul* and *Ningthourol Lambuba* also contain references to the *moibung*. The *Cheitharol Kumbaba* attributes the making or invention of the *pung* to the reign of Khuyoi Tompok (L. I. Singh & N. K. Singh, 2015, pp. 1–2), while *Ningthourol Lambuba* gives a more elaborate account of how the body of the drum and membrane were made. According to this narrative, a hollowed tree trunk was first tried with deer and tiger hides, but these did not produce the desired sound. The use of cattle hide subsequently enabled the drum to function effectively, after the hide was dried and fastened over the hollow wooden body with cane (Bhogeshwar, 1967, p. 17). The episode is particularly valuable because it connects musical innovation with experimentation in material selection, tensioning and construction.

The historical references also show that instruments could perform communicative and political functions. *Naothingkhong Phambal Kaba*, an account narrating the coronation of Naothingkhong (663 – 793 AD) records the use of the *pung* to summon people during wartime (Manihar Singh, 1983, p. 9). *Moirang Shaiyon* refers to the use of *Chingyensin* wood for making the *pung* and mentions the *lanpung* as a musical instrument associated with war (Bormani, 2003, p. 56). The text further identifies Wanglen Pungdinghanba as a skilled maker of *pungs* whose instruments were reputed for their superior sound (Bormani, 2003, p. 151). These accounts indicate that the drum was not simply an instrument for musical performance as it could function as a medium of public communication and also as an object whose manufacture involved specialised craft knowledge.

Other instruments similarly appear in records of administration, ceremony and royal display. *Chengleiron* refers to the use of *sharik* and *tharaochi* made of copper (Manaoyaima, 1979, pp. 9–19), while the *Loiyamba Shinyen*, a text dated to around 1110 AD, records the use of instruments including the *pena*, *pung*, *pere* and *singka* in connection with royal activities and processions (Chandrasekhar, 1975, pp. 20–38). The *Ningthourol Lambuba* also records the use of the *sharik* during the reign of Kongyamba (1324 – 1335 AD) and the *toudri* during the reign of Khagemba (1597 – 1652 AD) (Bhogeshwar, 1967, pp. 283–284). The *Ningthourol Lambuba* further associates the *khung* with the coronation of Labanyachandra (1798 – 1801 AD) and records the accompaniment of royal processions by musical instruments such as the *pung*, *pere* and *sanhai* (Bilasini, 1994, pp. 47–75). These references suggest that instrumental music was embedded in the ceremonial and political life of the kingdom.

An ethnographic description by T. C. Hodson emphasised the variety of Meitei instruments while observing that their design and construction were relatively basic. He identified several forms of drums, horns and conch-shell instruments, as well as stringed instruments ranging from simple indigenous forms to the violin, which he regarded as an importation from Bengal (Hodson, 1908, p. 57). The traditional musical instruments of the Meiteis may be classified into aerophones, idiophones, membranophones and chordophones. Aerophones produce sound through the vibration of an air column and include the *toudri*, *tharaochi*, *pere* and *moibung*. Idiophones generate sound primarily through the vibration of the instrument itself and instruments such as the *sembung* and *sharik* belong to this category. Membranophones depend upon a stretched membrane, most clearly represented by the different forms of *pung*. The *pena* belongs to the chordophone category because its sound is generated through a vibrating string. The same instrument may be simultaneously a musical device, a ritual object, a signal or a marker of authority.

The traditional musical instruments used by the Meiteis are discussed in the following paragraphs.

## 1. Pung

The *pung* is a wooden membranophone with an oval body that tapers towards both ends. The smaller end is called *pung manao* and the larger end *pung maru*. The hollow wooden body is covered at both ends with animal hide, while the system of fastening has changed over time: cane bindings were traditionally used, whereas leather straps have subsequently become common. Meitei historical tradition places the development of the *pung* in the reign of Khuyoi Tompok, and the narrative of its construction preserves an important memory of experimentation with wood, hide and fastening techniques.

The existence of several specialised forms demonstrates that the *pung* was adapted to different institutional and ritual contexts rather than being a single uniform instrument.

### i. Tanyei pung



FIG: TANYEI

The *Tanyei pung* had a specifically temporal and administrative function within the palace. It was sounded from the Tanyei Loishang to mark the time of day. The instrument was positioned vertically on a wooden stand and struck with the rhizome of bamboo. It approximately measures 0.72 m in height and 0.71 m in membrane circumference. Its function illustrates how sound could organise daily life within a royal institutional setting.

### ii. Langtei pung



FIG: LANGTEI PUNG

The *Langtei pung* represents a continuing link between older performance traditions and living village practice. It has been associated with dance and musical events and remains in use in communities including Andro, Sekmai, Khurkhul, Phayeng and Leimaram during *Lai Haraoba*. Unlike the standard *pung*, it does not maintain the same distinction between *maru* and *manao* with both sides of equal measurement. It is played by striking one side with the hand and the other with a stick. It is approximately 0.51 m long, with a membrane measuring about 0.41 m and a circumference of roughly 1.32 m. Its continued use demonstrates that some traditional instruments survive because their functions remain embedded in community ritual and performance.

### iii. Khunpung



FIG: KHUNPUNG

The *Khunpung* historically had a public communicative role as it was used to announce events or convey news within a village or locality. Its contemporary use is much more closely associated with

Lai Haraoba. It is generally large and is made from selected woods, such as *Uningthou* (*Phoebe henesiana*) and *Wang* (*Gmelina arborea*) and is sounded with a stick. The shift from village-wide announcement to ritual performance illustrates a wider process of functional transformation in which an instrument may lose one social role while retaining another within a ceremonial setting.

#### iv. Laipung

The *Laipung* resembles the *Khunpung* in its general construction and scale but possesses a more restricted ritual status. It is kept within the village and is associated specifically with the *Lai Haraoba*. The instrument is regarded as sacred and the tradition prohibits its removal from the place where it is preserved. Its performance is entrusted to village elders, and only one side is struck.

#### v. Meitei pung

The *pung* is the principal indigenous drum of the Meiteis. The body may be fashioned from the wood of several locally known trees including *Wang*, *Urangmei*, *Leihao leishang* (*Michelia champaca*), *Theibong* (*Artocarpus heterophyllus*), *Heinou* (*Mangifera indica*) and *Tairen* (*Cedrela toona*). The instrument is approximately 0.68 m long with a circumference of about 0.86 m. A cane strap known as *punglee*, allows it to be played in standing position, while the two leather membranes measure roughly 0.42 m and 0.39 m in circumference. The *pung* has been associated with royal coronations and festivals such as Kwaktanba and Kwakjatra.



FIG: MEITEI PUNG

## 2. Khung



FIG: KHUNG

The *khung* is a large hollowed wooden sound-producing device that may represent an earlier technological stage in the development of the drum. It is one of the oldest musical instruments in the Meitei society and is regarded as a possible precursor of the *pung* (Tejbati, 2022, p. 23). The instrument is made by scooping out the central portion of a large tree trunk, including woods such as *Ching yensin*, *Leihao* and *Uningthou*. It is sounded by striking with a stick on the hollow surface to maintain the rhythm of dance. The *khung* has been associated particularly with Phayeng and Andro, where it has been preserved as part of local cultural heritage. At Andro it is connected with the annual festival of local deity Panam Ningthou, while in Phayeng it is known as *Haon* (Tejbati, 2022, p. 23).

## 3. Pena

The *pena* is a traditional folk-fiddle of the Meiteis (Harimati, 2007, p. 5). It is widely regarded within Meitei cultural tradition as one of the oldest indigenous instruments. The different parts of the *pena* are made from bamboo, wood, coconut shell, animal hide, pony-tail hair and a hook-shaped metal (Harimati, 2007, pp. 19-32). There are two types of *pena* - the *Khutkhung pena*, whose *maru* (resonator) is made from *waru* (a mature bamboo rhizome) and the larger *Pena achouba*, whose resonator is made from coconut shell. The instrument has two principal structural components, the



FIG: PENA

*khonding* or main frame and the *cheijing* which is associated with the bow or handle.

The *khonding* consists of the *maru*, which may be made from bamboo rhizome, dried gourd or coconut shell and the *pungmai* (to cover the *maru*), traditionally made from the hide of animals such as deer, frog, monitor lizard, etc. as well as cloth, thread and a bamboo pipe. The *cheijing* includes a wooden handle, a curved iron rod known as *yotkon*, decorative or resonant elements such as *yong sarik* or 108 brass beads and *shamei*, the hair of a pony's tail. The *maru* was made of clay, later on by the shell of the *Khongtumba* (gourd) and eventually coconut shell which took place during the reign of Khagemba.

#### 4. Sembung

The *sembung* is a traditional gong generally made of bell metal, although brass and bronze forms are also known. Its central portion projects slightly from the surrounding surface, producing a distinctive acoustic form. It is struck with a stick whose striking end is covered with leather or cloth.

The *sembung* was often associated with tribute and war booty. It was manufactured from bell-metal during the time of Khuyoi Tompok (154 – 264 A.D.) and represents a cultural link between Manipur and upper Burma and Thailand (Kamei, 2015, p. 114). The instrument has also been used in Moirang during Lai Haraoba. The *sembung*, thus, points to a wider network of exchange, political contact and ritual performance. Its metal

construction also points to the importance of metallurgical knowledge and among the Meiteis.



FIG: SEMBUNG

#### 5. Sharik

The *sharik* is a metal hand-bell, commonly made of brass or bronze. Its form belongs to a broader bell tradition extending across South and Southeast Asia (Kulachandra, 2014, p. 51), but within Meitei society it has acquired distinctive ritual functions. The use of *Sengao sharik* or ankle-bells has become common. The instrument is particularly used by the *maibis* who are the ritual specialists or priestesses who perform in ceremonial functions.



FIG: SHARIK

#### 6. Toudri



FIG: TOUDRI

The *toudri* is a traditional aerophone with seven holes including the embouchure. It is usually made from the reed known locally as *Tou* (*Phragmites karka*). Bamboo species such as *Saneibi* (*Bambusa arundinacea*) and *Khokwa* (*Dendrocalamus strictus*) may also be used, with the holes bored into the bamboo body. The instrument measures approximately 0.63 m and resembles a flute; it can be played vertically or horizontally. The Ningthourol Lambuba refers to the use of *toudri* in the early history of Manipur and also associates a six-hole bamboo version with the reign of Khagemba (Bhogeshwar, 1967, pp. 283–284).

## 7. Tharaochi

The *tharaochi* is a wind instrument whose curved form resembles a buffalo horn. It most likely evolved from an animal horn in the early period to a copper form in the later period, known as *kori tharaochi*.

*Ningthourol Lambuba* indicates the acquisition of a copper *tharaochi* by Naothingkhong and describes it as war booty he obtained from the Mangangs in the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD (Bhogeshwar, 1967).



FIG: THARAOCHI

## 8. Pere/Pere-shringga

The *pere*, also known as *pere-shringga* or *singa*, is another aerophone associated with interregional contact. It was procured from the Pongs during the reign of Kyamba (1467 – 1508 AD) and gained wider popularity under Khagemba. It resembles the *tharaochi* but has a longer horn, while the brass version is described as a shorter trumpet in comparison with the Indian *shringga* (Kulachandra, 2014, p. 52).

## 9. Moibung

The *moibung* is a conch-shell aerophone measuring approximately 0.25 m in length and about 0.38 m in circumference. The practice of playing the conch was probably influenced by wider Indian traditions. However, *Panthoibi Khonggul* points to the existence of *moibung* in the early Meitei society associating it with fishing, warfare and the protection of people from harmful spiritual forces (Singh, 1967). Its ritual significance became particularly prominent after the expansion of Vaishnavite Hindu practice in Manipur, especially from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the *moibung* became an established element of religious ceremonies.



FIG: MOIBUNG

## CONCLUSION

The traditional musical instruments of the Meiteis constitute a significant body of material and intangible heritage. Each instrument embodies relationships among materials, craft skills, performers, institutions and ritual meanings. Traditional historical sources further show that musical instruments participated in wider processes of state formation, interregional contact and religious transformation. A historical study of these instruments is therefore also a study of knowledge transmission. The making of an instrument requires knowledge of appropriate species of wood or bamboo, methods of hollowing and shaping, hide selection and treatment, metal working, stringing, fastening, tuning and performance. Such knowledge is often embedded in practice and transmitted through communities and specialised makers rather than through formal written manuals. These instruments need to be understood as repositories of historical memory as well as musical devices. Their study can contribute to the documentation of indigenous technological knowledge, the preservation of craft traditions and a better understanding of the cultural history of Manipur.

## REFERENCES

1. Bilasini Devi, H. (Ed.). (1994). *Ningthourol Lambuba* (Vol. 2). Published by the editor.
2. Bhogeshwar, O. (Ed.). (1967). *Ningthourol Lambuba* (Vol. 1). Published by the editor.
3. Bormani, S. (2003). *Moirang Shaiyon* (3rd ed.). Published by the author.
4. Chandra, M. S. (1979). *Poireiton Khunthok*. Manipur Sahitya Parishad.
5. Chandrasekhar, K. (Ed.). (1975). *Loiyamba Shinyen*. M. Ibotombi Singh.
6. Harimati Devi, N. (2007). *Pena: The Meitei traditional folk fiddle*. Pech Publishing House.
7. Hodson, T. C. (1908). *The Meitheis*. D. Nutt.
8. Kamei, G. (2015 Reprint). *History of Manipur: Pre-colonial period*. Akansha Publishing House.

- 
9. Khelchandra Singh, N. (1995 Reprint). *Naothingkhong Phambal Kaba*. Published by the author.
  10. Kulachandra Sharma, B. (2014). *Elements of Meitei folklore*. B. Kuklubin Sharma.
  11. Manaoyaima, N. (Ed.). (1979). *Chengleiron*. Chandrabali N.
  12. Singh, L. I., & Singh, N. K. (2015 Reprint). *Cheitharol Kumbaba*. Manipuri Sahitya Parishad.
  13. Singh, M. C. (1967). *Panthoibi Khonggul*. Manipuri Sahitya Parishad.
  14. Singh, U. (2009). *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India: From the Stone Age to the 12<sup>th</sup> century*. Pearson.
  15. Tejbati, L. (2022 Reprint). *Manipurgi Natka Mari Leinaba Esheigi Khutlaishing*. Tejbati Enterprises.