

The Traditional Musical Instruments of the Nagas TribesNoyingpeni Ovung¹ & Dr. P. K. Pattnaik²DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17336585>**Review:01/10/2025,****Acceptance:01/10/2025****Published:12/10/2025**

Abstract: Music has consistently played a crucial role in the life of the Nagas, serving as a medium for communication, storytelling, and celebration. Folk music has been a significant genre throughout the history of Naga music. The songs often centered on themes including nature, love stories, harvest, and community celebrations often featuring lyrical poetry and are accompanied by traditional instruments or rhythmic clapping. Musical instruments of the Nagas are more than instruments for entertainments, it serving as essential reservoirs of Naga history, identity, and spiritual beliefs and are crafted from indigenous materials such as bamboo, wood, animal skin, and gourds etc. The distinct sounds and construction techniques of these instruments often reflects the unique cultural nuances and identities of individual Naga tribes. In an era of increasing globalization, the preservation, promotion, and continues practice of playing traditional Naga musical instruments are essential for sustaining cultural distinctiveness, fostering intergenerational dialogs, and ensuring the enduring resonance of Naga heritage for future generations. Aligning with NEP 2020 in preservation of Indian Knowledge System, Naga musical instruments can be integrated into the school curriculum to foster a profound sense of pride and connection to one's heritage, while enhancing creativity and critical thinking rather than being limited to cultural festivals. However, with the extensive embrace of westernization in Nagaland has posed obstacles to the practices of traditional musical instruments including suppression and adaptation. This study explore the rich and diverse landscape of Naga traditional musical instruments, analyzing its cultural values, different types of musical instruments, and the profound impact of historical shifts, particularly the advent of Christianity, on its evolution.

Keyword: Naga, Musical instruments, indigenous materials, Christianity.

Introduction: Music constitutes one of the elements of the performing arts. It is regarded as the finest art form, utilizing sound as its medium. It is a composition of sounds generated by the human voice or musical instruments that provides pleasure to the listener. It is an articulation of feelings. Music constitutes a science when considering its technical aspects. Music can be categorised as folk or traditional and classical music. Traditional music is defined as music transmitted from one generation to another through oral, auditory, imitative, and learnt methods while classical music encompasses artistic styles characterized by distinguishing traits and meticulous organization (Syiem, 2015).

Music and Nagaland shares a deep bond as music is a part of the culture and woven deeply into the daily life of the people from religious rites, festivals, social gatherings, and personal expressions. Folk music is one of the most well-known music in early history of Nagas. Folk songs were an important part of the Naga tribes echoing their agricultural lifestyles and social customs often themes around nature, love, harvest, and community festivals. Folk songs are often accompanied by traditional instruments such as bamboo flutes, log drums, gongs, and stringed instruments meticulously constructed using natural materials (Lkr, 2022).

The Nagas are music enthusiasts by nature and are known for using a variety of musical instruments. They have been playing different instruments for different reasons, which are very interesting and can be recordable. In the past, children acquired lullabies from their parents as well as the elders from their respected dormitories. They learned songs and learnt to play a variety of musical instruments. It was through songs and music that they will communicate with one another on variety of significant matters, either in groups or on an individual basis. For example, if a man wanted to address and say something to women, he would rather speak through songs, which would then be answered with more suitable songs (Mongro, 1999).

Since time immemorial, people have conveyed their emotions of happiness and sorrow through music and songs played without musical instruments are incomplete. Music holds a significant role in the culture and identify of the Nagas. The folk music of the Nagas intricately connects to the daily life, rituals, and historical narratives. Naga folksongs were centered on romantic, warfare strength, power, agriculture, and ancestral praise. It also serves as a means for the youth to convey love, emotions, and sentiments. Traditional songs may also originate from customary laws, resulting in variations in tone and meanings among different tribes. Early

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folk instruments of the Nagas are made from natural materials such as bamboo, wood, animal skin, and horn which show profound connection between people with nature and their traditions. The musical instruments used by different Naga tribes includes bamboo flute, bamboo mouth-organ, cup violin, trumpet, log drum, blow horns etc. which plays an essential role in rituals, ceremonies, festivals, agricultural activities, storytelling's, and the preservation of ancestral traditions and history.

At the present scenario, we can see that there is a sharp decline of the use of folk musical instrument in our society. Our young generations are more inclined towards the modern musical instruments like piano, guitar, violin etc. which are westernized and in that process of adopting the modern art form, many customs and traditions have been lost or are at the verge of losing it. Therefore, it is very essential that we preserve and promote our folk musical instruments to our present generation as it is a means of transmission of our oral histories, tribal myths, and ethical values across generations, fostering a strong sense of community and belonging.

Review of Literature

Mawon (2015) examines the Hao musical instruments of the Tangkhul Nagas, highlighting their usage and significance in the traditional festivals which is transmitted over generations through oral, aural, and imitative and learnt transmission reflecting their traditional laws and customs. Historically, the craft of playing and constructing musical instruments were taught by the elders in *Longshim*. Materials utilized in crafting musical instruments includes animal skin and horn, horse hair, coconut husk, bitter melon shell, bamboo, cane, brass, bronze, and wood and *Tingteila*, a stringed instrument is regarded as the most important instrument. Over time, certain aspects of traditional festivals, folk music, and musical instruments have evolved due to factors such as growth of Christianity, introduction of modern education, westernization, interactions with communities, and economics influences. Today, very few younger generations possess the skills to create and perform on folk musical instruments.

Chasie (2015) aims to preserve the oral folklore and musical traditions of the Nagas. Finding found that 85% of the respondents agreed on the necessity to rejuvenate folk music and enhance musical talents, as western influence has diminished enthusiasm for traditional Naga folk music. It highlights the necessity to rejuvenate and preserve ancient musical instruments, fostering a stronger connection between historical folk music and the present generation. It suggested that, due to the declining interest of young people in folk music, a fusion of folk with various genres of western music can be revitalize and sustain interest thereby establishing a trend that preserves folk traditions and evokes memories of past and culture.

Konyak (2023) songs and dances play an important role in the ceremonies and festivals of the Nagas accompanied by the musical instruments. Musical instruments played a key role in accompanying them during festivals, rituals and death. People travelled alone through forest and village roads, pasturing and carrying cattle from nearby and distant villages, while accompanied by music. Music serves as accompaniment to love songs when young man visited girl's dormitory. It was believed that music was an intrinsic gift. Men were often in charge of designing and making the musical instruments although both genders composed songs, men were the ones who played the instrument.

Significant of the study

The Naga tribes are known for their profound cultural heritage and possess a deep connection to music which is deeply integral to their distinct identities, traditions, festivals, and daily life. Musical instruments play a significant role in our culture and history, but unfortunately they are on the verge of losing it. Despite its cultural relevance, younger generations are more attracted to Western music, resulting in decrease of traditional practices. Since the techniques for crafting instruments transmitted through generations, there exists a risk of their extinction in the absence of documentation.

Therefore, by studying about the Naga musical instruments it is essential for safeguarding cultural identity, understanding historical, social contexts, and fostering artistic innovation. It connects the past with the present ensuring that the rich musical heritage of the Naga continues to thrive amidst modernization. Consequently, the study and understanding of traditional musical instruments can ensure in preservation for the future generations. Through the documentation and promotion of these folk instruments, academics, educators, and artists contribute to the global recognition of Naga culture while fostering community pride and economic prospects.

Objectives of the Study

1. To study the traditional musical instruments of the Nagas tribes.
2. To study the significance of musical instruments in the Naga society.

Research Question

1. What are the various traditional musical instruments of the Naga tribes?
2. What is the significance of musical instrument in the Naga society?

Methodology of the Study

The study is qualitative in nature and data is based on both primary and secondary sources. The data was collected through observation, experience, and interview that have knowledge and experience of traditional musical instruments and secondary sources including, books, articles and journals related to cultural and indigenous sources were used to gather the data.

Traditional Musical Instruments of the Nagas

1. **Bamboo Flute:** The bamboo flute is a wind instrument crafted from a singular piece of bamboo. It typically features five to six finger holes that are to be pressed sequentially in a vertical manner on it in the central section of the bamboo. These little holes are designed for fingers placement, obstructing airflow during play and generating a pleasant melodious soothing sound embodying the serene and peaceful nature of rural life. The flute is crafted from bamboo of varying sizes to produce diverse pitches. The tunes of the bamboo flute draw inspiration from nature, such as the sounds of birds or the flow of rivers, embody the profound bond between the people and their surroundings. Typically, it is played by young males, particularly during courtship, to convey emotions and affection; nonetheless, it is accessible to both men and women. The flute is also played for recreational activities and cultural festivals.



Image by Author-Bamboo Flute: Photo taken at Nagaland State Museum

3. **The Bamboo Mouth-Organ:** One of the Nagas earliest traditional musical instruments is the bamboo mouth-organ. It is one of the smallest musical instruments, although it serves a variety of vital purposes. It is almost 6 inches long and half an inch width. An eight inch thread is linked to the end, which resembles a nail head, and it may be pulled out separately. With the aid of a sharp, pointed knife, a tiny section of the middle is removed vertically along the length and it can produce four different kinds of melodious sounds. To play this instrument, the player pulls the string and blows over the harps' tongue to produce a range of sounds. According to Chang Naga custom, the *Kongki* is an instrument that is used specially by women and is made from a special quality of bamboo to produce melodies sound. It is an integral part of every festivals and rituals in village. It is also played during millet harvest and field work resembling the sounds of their hard work.



Source from Akho Kicz. (2021). Bamboo Mouth- Organ [Video]. YouTube.

<https://youtu.be/305nd7YCCrc?si=tFEtH7qxhNSgasTE>

3. **Tati :** Tati is a single stringed plucked instrument mostly used to accompany a range of romantic traditional songs. The Tati is an instrument played by both men and women, not confined to a specific time or song. It is popularly used by the Angami and Chakesang Naga to perform traditional folk songs. The instrument, approximately 3- 4 feet in length, is constructed from a dried hollowed- out Bottle Gourd. This Bottle Gourd is encased in a thin film, like the bladder of animals and affixed to one end of a

pole. A string is affixed between the two ends of the pole over the film covered, hollow Bottle Gourd. Similar to other string instruments, the Tati generates sound by the vibration of the sting, which is amplified by the resonance of the plate affixed at the top. To modify the pitch of the Tati, the player can alter the pitch of the strings by either raising or lowering it (Chasie, 2015).

4. **The Cup Violin:** The Cup violin is a one stringed plucked wind instrument producing a melancholic and soothing sound and is performed in festivals and various occasions. The instrument comprises bamboo, and the string is constructed from either thread or women hair. To construct the cup violin, high-quality, slender bamboo is chosen, or dried caved-out Bottle Gourd is used. A bamboo of approximately 15 cm length, with a node at one end, must be meticulously carved to resemble a cup or mug. A tiny hole is created 5 cm beneath the rim of the cup on both opposing sides. A bamboo stick, approximately the thickness of a finger and two feet in length, is placed through the previously created holes, with at least half an inch of the stick projecting from the opposite sides. The artisan typically gathers hair from his beloved, as the instrument will be used to praise her beauty. Neither a knife nor a dao is employed to cut off the hair. One hand grips the bow while the other rubs the hair sting. Rubbing the hair string with the right hand while the left hand touches the hair string at various points generates the desired musical tones. It can discern a profound emotional connection between individuals during the creation of this instrument and its uses. Traditionally, it is believed that the hair of talkative and promiscuous women is better for producing a sharp sound, and hence, this hair is utilized in the construction of common violins. This instrument is also referred to as Midnight Violin due to its primary use during midnight (Mongro, 1999). Its melodious tunes add a distinct flavor to music and contribute to the overall cultural identity of the tribe. It is often used during ceremonies to convey emotions, mimic natural sounds or accompany folk songs.
5. **Blow Horn:** The blow horn is a wind instrument producing deep, resonant sounds. It is among the oldest musical instruments used by different cultures for various purposes. It is used when enemies invade the village, the gate-keeper will immediately blow the trumpet as a sign of danger coming towards the village. This will make the male members of the village come out of their homes with their weapons and stand ready to fight. It is used as a signal when warriors return home with the heads of their enemies. It is also used during festivals, feast, religious ceremonies, or signal emergencies involving threats from enemies, village fires, and attack by wild animals in the villages, etc. The material used for making the trumpet includes thin bamboo, buffalo horns, mithun horns, and cords. The horns of these animals are meticulously cut out using an axe and dao, and are typically hollowed out for the making horn trumpet. The pointed end of the horn is cut off by at least one inch to facilitate the creation of enough holes. This small hole in the pointed horn is designed for placing the lips to produce sound. Its sound has a symbolic significance and is frequently linked to strength, prosperity, and cultural identity.



Image by Author - Single Stringed Instrument Cup Violin, Single Stringed Instrument (Tati), Wind Instrument (Buffalo Horn):

Photo taken at Nagaland State Museum

6. **Log Drum:** The log drum is a huge, hollowed out wooden instrument built from the trunk of a single tree. It is more than just a musical instrument. It embodies the village's essence, resilience, cohesion, and ancestral legacy. The selected tree for this drum is often a strong species such as teak or ironwood. The central part of the log drum is hollowed out running down the length of the drum to provide a clearer and louder echoing sound when struck. The exterior of the log drum is designed with carvings depicting warriors, animals, or traditional symbols that represent the tribe's bravery, strengths, and beliefs. The dimensions of the log drum differ among village to villages and in every khel or sector has one log drum. The morung plays a significant role in construction a log drum. In some small villages, where there are less male members, all the adult male members gather and collaboratively

construct a log drum. In all instances, a witch or wizard is initially consulted, and according to their guidance, the location and species of the tree are determined. Following consultation, only a select few individuals are chosen to initially cut the wood. Subsequently, the remaining individuals could proceed with the log drum construction while adhering closely to the following taboos. The construction and playing of the log drum constitute a sacred tradition, frequently involving rituals and communal engagement. In Khiamniungan it believed that the log drum has a spirit inside it therefore it is treated with great respect where only certain people are allowed to play it and is often kept in a specific drum house in the center of the village.

The log drum functioned as conveying information about public meetings, emergencies in the village such as fires, announcing dangers, welcoming warriors returning home with head, played during festivals and the funerals of notable person. During festivals, the log drum is played rhythmically and thunderously to accompany warrior dances and songs, echoing throughout the village. The log drum is typically played by a group of men in unison, employing rhythmic patterns through striking the drum on special occasions or festivals. It is played by striking it with robust wooden sticks. The players stand on both side of the drum and beat it in rhythm. Diverse rhythms and patterns are employed to create distinct sounds that convey unique meanings or messages. The messages conveyed by the drum may vary from village to village; hence, confidentiality can be transmitted easily.

In ancient times, there was a practice of worshipping the drum with animal blood, and occasionally with human blood as well. However, such practices are no longer practiced with the arrival of Christianity in the Naga society. Thus, this log drum only serves as a souvenir in Naga tribes as a sample (Mongro, 1999). **Gong:** Brass Gong is a musical instrument valued as a treasure for ages. It is composed of pure brass and serves as a medium of exchange during the practice of the barter system. The sound of the gong echoes across the entire varying in tone according to the size of the gongs. Gongs also function as a bell in times of emergency and to announce the demise of a prominent of the community member (Konyak, 2023). It is typically suspended in a public hall and utilized to call people during meeting, to alert them of natural disasters and serve as musical instruments to accompany dance during festivals.



Image by Author - This Log drum was carved in 1920 from Hongkhong Morung Longchang Village, Mon district and donated by Shri E.Eshak Hessum Hon'ble Parliamentary Secretary Art & Culture and unveiled on 15th September 2017 at Nagaland State Museum.

7. **Gong:** Brass Gong is a musical instrument valued as a treasure for ages. It is composed of pure brass and serves as a medium of exchange during the practice of the barter system. The sound of the gong echoes across the entire varying in tone according to the size of the gongs. Gongs also function as a bell in times of emergency and to announce the demise of a prominent of the community member (Konyak, 2023). It is typically suspended in a public hall and utilized to call people during meeting, to alert them of natural disasters and serve as musical instruments to accompany dance during festivals.

8. **BamHum:** BamHum is a new wind instrument crafted from bamboo by musician Moa Subong from Nagaland. The term BamHum originates from the combination of the words bamboo and humming. It resembles a flute made of medium-sized bamboo, which is easily played by humming a melody into the hum hole, producing a pleasant sound. To craft the instrument, a bamboo piece with a node at one end is subjected to heat treatment for 10 -15 minutes or longer. One end of the instrument features a rattle, while the opposite end has a hold in the bamboo node for air passage. The instrument features a single hold, through which the user hums and the user can adjust the tone to achieve the desired musical notes and pitch from the instrument.



Bamhum wind instrument

[Source: https://nif.org.in/innovation/bamhum-a-bamboo-wind-musical-instrument/918](https://nif.org.in/innovation/bamhum-a-bamboo-wind-musical-instrument/918)

Discussion

Prior to the extensive emergence widespread advent of Christianity, Naga tribes possessed a rich array of indigenous musical instruments, often interwoven with their animistic beliefs, rituals, and everyday life. The advent of Christianity in the land of Nagas led to the abandonment of numerous indigenous songs and instrumentals linked to animistic rites. This led to a generational gap in which young generation are more unfamiliar with their traditional folk music and instruments. There is a transition from traditional musical instruments to incorporation of western tunes and instruments including such as keyboards, guitars, and drums, with choral music gaining significant prominence among the Naga young generations.

Christianity has significantly influenced Naga musical instruments and customs, resulting in a complex interaction of suppression, adaptation, and revitalization. The missionaries denounced the Naga religion, criticized culture practices such as singing, dancing and festivals which lacked direct religion significance and characterized these activities as the 'Wrath of God'. Numerous Naga ceremonial costumes were wiped out and the consumption of local rice beer were prohibited, and traditional songs and dances were replaced by foreign alternatives, religious rites were forbidden and replaced by Christian practices (Horam, 1988).

Recently, there has been a rise in the integration of Naga indigenous folk songs and certain indigenous musical instruments with the contemporary genres. Local folk artist such as the Tetseo Sisters exemplifies the rich heritage of traditional folk music accompanied by one-stringed traditional musical instruments like Tati, representing both Indian and international and folk- fusion band like Abiogenesis, creates indigenous and tribal music that narrates Naga folklores. Christianity initially posed a challenge to traditional forms, but it has also served as a catalyst for the adaptation, reinterpretations, and in certain instances, the revitalization of Naga musical heritage within a new religious framework.

There is an infusion of Christian gospel lyrics into traditional folk tunes, resulting in a distinctive blend that facilitates the preservation of indigenous melodies within a Christian context. Naga musical instruments possess deep significance in the cultural, social, and spiritual realms of the diverse Naga tribes. They are not merely instruments for producing sound but are intricately connected to their traditions, rituals, narratives, and everyday lives. The promotion of Naga musical instruments can elevate cultural tourism, especially during events such as the Hornbill Festivals, where traditional music draws young local people and international audiences creating awareness of the unique Naga culture as well as enhancing the local economic and elevates knowledge of Naga heritage.

With the integration of Indian Knowledge System and NEP 2020 into the mainstream education framework, indigenous practices such as Naga musical instruments can be integrated into the school and higher education curriculum. Subjects such as Social Science, History, Music, Mathematics, English etc. can integrate indigenous knowledge and practices into the curriculum. This will provide the

students with a comprehensive understanding of their folklores and cultural practices of the past by providing hand on experience from the experts or community people who are expert in the field will help in promoting and preserving the rich indigenous knowledge as well as a sense of pride among the youth.

Conclusion

The traditional musical instruments of the Nagas are more than just musical tools; they hold the voice of our ancestral, the rhythm of our festivals, memories, and the spirit of our people and identity. Even though modern instruments have become very popular, these very ages old instruments continue to hold value in festivals, storytelling and keeping the culture alive. Naga musical instruments are far more than just sound-producing devices. They are important parts of Naga culture embodying the past, strengthening social bonds, and providing a powerful way to express themselves in every aspect of their lives. Their significance lies in their ability to connect generations, celebrate traditions, and recount the persistent narrative of the Naga people. Thereby preserving such instruments and educating the younger generation about their significance at educational institutions and cultural events can contribute to vitality and prominence of musical instruments.

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