Folk Music of the Ethnic Minorities of Manipur

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Considering its ethnic plurality, Manipur could be termed the prototype of the whole of Northeast India which has more than two hundred ethnic nationalities. Despite its small size, Manipur has thirty-three constitutionally recognized ethnic nationalities and many more unrecognized groups or ‘tribals’ as they are officially known. Each of the communities has its own distinctive characteristics of folk-life, customs, dialects, beliefs and practices that they consider to be their own and that help shape an identity of their own amidst a mosaic of other identities.

Music of the ethnic nationalities of Manipur constitutes a major component of their folklife. It is here that no-one can look at their music as independent of their life. In their music, one will find their hopes, aspirations and frustrations as well. The ups and downs of their voices and their tonal variations draw, in the listeners' mind, the beautiful landscape of the hilly terrains. They also reflect the hardship of their agricultural activities. Music does not stand on its own. It accompanies dance movements or physical movements they perform while engaging in cultivation activities or ritualistic performances. The remark of Prof. Peter Bodeut that “Romanian folk dances, in their movements, reflect the entire history of Romanian life” is also true in case of the folk music of ethnic minorities of Manipur.


Like any other tribal music, the music of the ethnic communities of Manipur is rhythmic rather than melodious. The rhythm is maintained through the use of percussion. They also use voices like shouts and cries to bring a change in the rhythm and corresponding changes to the accompanying dance movement. They are accustomed to applying music-like utterances while engaging in agricultural activities in the field and other activities. These are monosyllabic expressions like ‘ho’, ‘ha’, ‘hoi’, etc. They do not have any meaning but the music provides a stimulus to their activity. These are also found lifted from real life experience and used in songs. It is common practice among the communities that the singers of such music-like songs do not start the music at a time with all the voices in their respective notes. Singers of the dominant note will lead first, then the chord and last the low voice. Thus they will present beautiful harmonic music. The Kabuis call it “Chang tat hoi” or “Hoitan”, Maos call it “Uri-han”, “Lota-han” or “Mabho-han” and Tangkhuls call it “Kham-mohon”. So, a kind of harmonization is there in the music.

There are some common features running across most of the music of the communities. The singers in general are divided in three groups. In Tangkhul, the first voice is known as “Lokyel” and in some way it approximates the soprano of Western music. The women generally take the lead singing Lokyel. The second voice group is known as “Khokrei” and it resembles the bass of the West. This is a low and heavy voice sung by the men together with the leader of the women group. The third voice group is known as “Lokla” and, again, may be compared to the alto of the western music. This is the harmonic voice or the Chord given by the women group. Thus the whole group gives polyphonic music. Another group known as “Khanganui”, equivalent...
of the tenor, has been introduced recently. We should remember that ethnic communities of Manipur have been embracing Christianity through missionaries who came from the West and, through them, have imbibed many things from the West and re-appropriated them as their own.

Harmony is intellectual, while melody is purely emotional. The ethnic communities have their own harmonic system of singing. The singers do not need any pre-composed notes on paper. The composition invariably takes place vividly in front of the audience inspired by the emotions and feelings that come spontaneously to their minds. They are however not familiar with the intellectual exercises in singing a harmonic music, only that they distribute the notes according to the pitch of their respective voices. Their music is a simple harmonisation having a common motif like the development of sounds in the ‘drone’ of the tumbura of the Indian music.

Tangkhul, Rongmei and many other ethnic communities play bowing-style stringed instruments. Mao play the plucking style with fingers. Of all the bowing instruments, we may make mention of ‘La’ of the Rongmei, ‘Nra’ of Zemi, ‘Ra’ of Liangmei, ‘Taila’ of Tarao, ‘Tari’ of Maring, ‘Tingtela’ of Tangkhul and ‘Gaigong’ of Paomei. Another stringed instrument played by plucking with fingers is ‘Olabii’, a 4 feet long instrument with a thin bamboo finger board. The sound box or resonator is a bowl covered with thin hide and over it only one metal string runs. This is used by Mao and another instrument of similar kind used by Paomei is known as ‘Lanae’.

Some more stringed instruments used by other tribes are ‘Sananta’ of Tarao, ‘Tingtang’ of the Hmar, ‘Selangdah’ of Chongthu, ‘Sirangdar’ of Anal, ‘Silangda’ of Thadou, ‘Sirangdar’ of Kom, ‘Serangdar’ of Koireng and ‘Sarangdar’ of Purum. These instruments resemble the ‘Sarinda’ of Bengal. Sarinda is predominantly used by the indigenous communities of the northern hilly tracts of India and some in Bihar. In Assam, this instrument is found among the old Assamese who sing ‘Borgit’ and they call it ‘Sarengdar’. In Manipur, the bow is made of fibre extracted from the bark of a tree called ‘singkap.’

Another instrument is the cylindrical or barrel drum made of wood covered with leather and used for percussion. Small drums of this kind are used among the groups in Manipur. They are beaten with a stick or sticks. Each group gives names of their own to this instrument - the Purum call it ‘Khong’, Simte call it ‘Khuang’, Tarao call it ‘Khung’, ‘Khungpee’, ‘Khungral’ or ‘khungtame’ according to differences in sizes. The Mao never use such drums or any kind of percussion instrument in their dance and music. They prefer hand claps instead.

The most obvious Southeast Asian character is the presence of knobbed gongs with a convex bulge at the center. Meitei call it ‘Shembung’, Rongmei call it ‘Shenmu’, Kom call it ‘Chum’ and likewise all the groups using it give different names of their own. A small idiophone made of a piece of split bamboo, only seven to eight centimetres long, is also used. It is played with a string, placed at the mouth of the player and plucked with fingers. The mouth of the player acts as the resonator as well as producing delicate tonal sheds with the use of the breath. Paomeis call it ‘Chuui’, Tarao call it ‘Saral ting’ and all have their own names. Many use the horn for giving rhythm to their music and dances by beating it. Simtes call it ‘Saki’, Tarao call it ‘Sheelki’, Koirengs call it ‘Sekhi’, etc. ‘Rusem’ or ‘Gosem’ is an aerophone, a wind instrument consisting of a hollowed gourd wind chest holding several pipes of reed. When the holes on the pipes are closed or opened, either chords or melodies can be played. Such instruments are believed to be the oldest in the world and believed to have originated from Southeast Asia. Purum, Simte, Tarao, Vaiphei, Koireng, Kom, Paite etc. use it with different names of their own. Flute is used, but the horizontal flute is more popular than the vertical flute. Trumpets made of bamboo or horns are also used.

Located at the junction of South Asia and Southeast Asia, the ethnic communities of Manipur reveal a harmonious confluence in the culture of their musical instruments and the music itself.