



Ka 'Singphong: An Isolated Khasi Folk Musical Instrument

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Abstract: The Khasis are music lovers. They like to sing, dance, and play musical instruments. There are many musical instruments belonging to the Khasi tribe. Some are very popular and some are on the verge of extinction. The popular ones can be seen on many platforms but some are confined only at home. One such instrument is called Ka 'Singphong which is a home musical instrument. This study aims to investigate Ka 'Singphong which is an isolated Khasi folk instrument. Ka 'Singphong is a musical instrument played for accompanying folk songs and accompanying dance music. Folk songs and dance speak about the history and culture of the people. Ka 'Singphong has very much contributed musically to society but as seen today it is seldom played by Khasi musicians. The musical instrument is not common within the society and this has led the people to practically not use it. It has become idle and has been seen only in a few villages. Therefore, this study is an attempt to investigate the factors that led to the isolation of the instruments and at the same time suggest ways and means to revive and promote to gain popularity amongst the present generation and the society as a whole.

Index Terms - Khasi Folk Musical instrument, Isolated, Ka 'Singphong, Home Musical Instrument, Percussion Instrument, Reviving and promoting.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Khasi is a race that is rich in music. Lyngdoh (1991) writes, that the Khasi love dances, music, and songs [1]. Folk music is a genre of music that is created, sung, and handed down from one generation to another. It belongs to a particular community and is also known by many. Syiem (2005) opines folk music is therefore handed down from one generation to another by word of mouth. In the process, no formal learning or training is involved [2]. It is incomplete to talk about Khasi folk music without mentioning the different folk instruments of the Khasi community. These musical instruments not only produce musical sound but also explain the social structure of the tribe. The Khasi community has a wide range of musical instruments ranging from drums, strings, wind instruments, and a variety of percussion instruments.

Ka 'Singphong is a reeded percussion instrument that is rectangular in shape and played by striking with the palm on the front side and plucking the bamboo strings from the back of the instrument. Bareh (1991) writes Diengphong, a flat netted frame shaped rectangularly, is affixed to 4 battens made of slits along its border [3]. The instrument is known by different names in different villages depending on the local language they speak. It is an instrument used at home for playing around the hearth hence very few people are aware of the existence of this instrument. As an instrument, it is confined mostly to only the four walls of the house. Perhaps this is one of the reasons that the instrument is not popular among the Khasi people.

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The Khasis is a tribe rich in music and musical instruments. There are however a few musical instruments that are rarely seen or played by Khasi musicians and one such instrument which is seldomly used and played is called Ka 'Singphong. This instrument is seen only among a few villages of the Khasi hills and it is observed that it is on the verge of extinction. Very few villages play this instrument or perhaps only keep it as a showpiece. Since they are hardly used and played by musicians, documenting in any form the music produced by this instrument is very little. To a few, Ka 'Singphong is a home musical instrument that is played after coming home from work. As an instrument it not only soothes the mind and fatigueness of the body but it is also a means of communication between a father, uncle, or any elderly person at home and the children of the family. Another important factor for the unpopularity of Ka 'Singphong is the use of the internet. Social media and other forms of entertainment have replaced the quality time between the elders of the house and the children. These factors may give rise to the discontinuity of playing the musical instrument.

III. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- To locate the accessibility of the Ka 'Singphong.
- To examine the uses of Ka 'Singphong.
- To compare the accessibility and uses of Ka 'Singphong with other Khasi folk musical instruments.
- To describe the factors that contributes towards the isolation of Ka 'Singphong.
- To suggest ways and means of reviving and promoting Ka 'Singphong.

IV. NEED OF THE STUDY

Every instrument has its role to play in contributing to society. Ka 'Singphong which is a Khasi folk musical instrument has an important role to play, especially in narrating stories and cultural knowledge to the present and future generation. As observed, Ka 'Singphong has distinctive features that perhaps will enable the instrument to be well-known and earn a special place in the music performance perspective. The current status of the instrument does not show signs of progress to that level at the same time that most people are not even aware of its existence. The decreasing number of skilled practitioners and craftsmen sense the need to conduct a study to examine the accessibility and uses of the instrument and at the same time investigate the factors that contribute to the isolation of the instruments. With an aim to revive and promote the instruments, it is a need of the hour to catch hold of the salient features that this instrument has to offer to the Khasi community and the music community as a whole.

V. LITERATURE REVIEW

Khasi performances though in dance or song are always accompanied by the traditional instruments (Wanswet, 2001) [4]. Gurdon (1990) writes that the Wars of the twenty-five villages in the Khyrim State make a sort of harp out of reed, which is called ka 'sing ding phong [5]. A successful player of folk or traditional instruments is immersed in the culture that composed and created the music and its instruments (Crozier, 2007) [6].

Though we take immense pride in the rich musical heritage of our country, there are several instruments, both classical and folk, that are either lost to time or are on the verge of extinction. These musical instruments, most of them which find a mention in ancient and notable literary works have shaped Indian Classical and Folk music through time (Nighoskar, 2021) [7].

The kit player is responsible for keeping a band on time, and almost all percussion players require a clear conviction of purpose that enables them to come in on the right note at the right time (Crozier, 2007) [8]. Music has to be coaxing from many instruments: a violin must be fingered with dexterity, a flute blown with sensitivity. Few such requirements apparently apply to percussion instruments. Just hit them, shake them, or scrape them, and out come the sounds. But playing percussion is not quite simple. Exactly the right amount of force must be used to set the instrument vibrating in the right way (Dorling, n.d.) [9]. Learning to play an instrument is not merely a matter of understanding the mechanical processes associated with producing sounds on that instrument. It is, crucially, being able to give expression and meaning to music as it is played

on that instrument. A folk player needs to learn one's craft through the instrument rather than by mere technical mastery (Crozier, 2007) [10].

VI. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

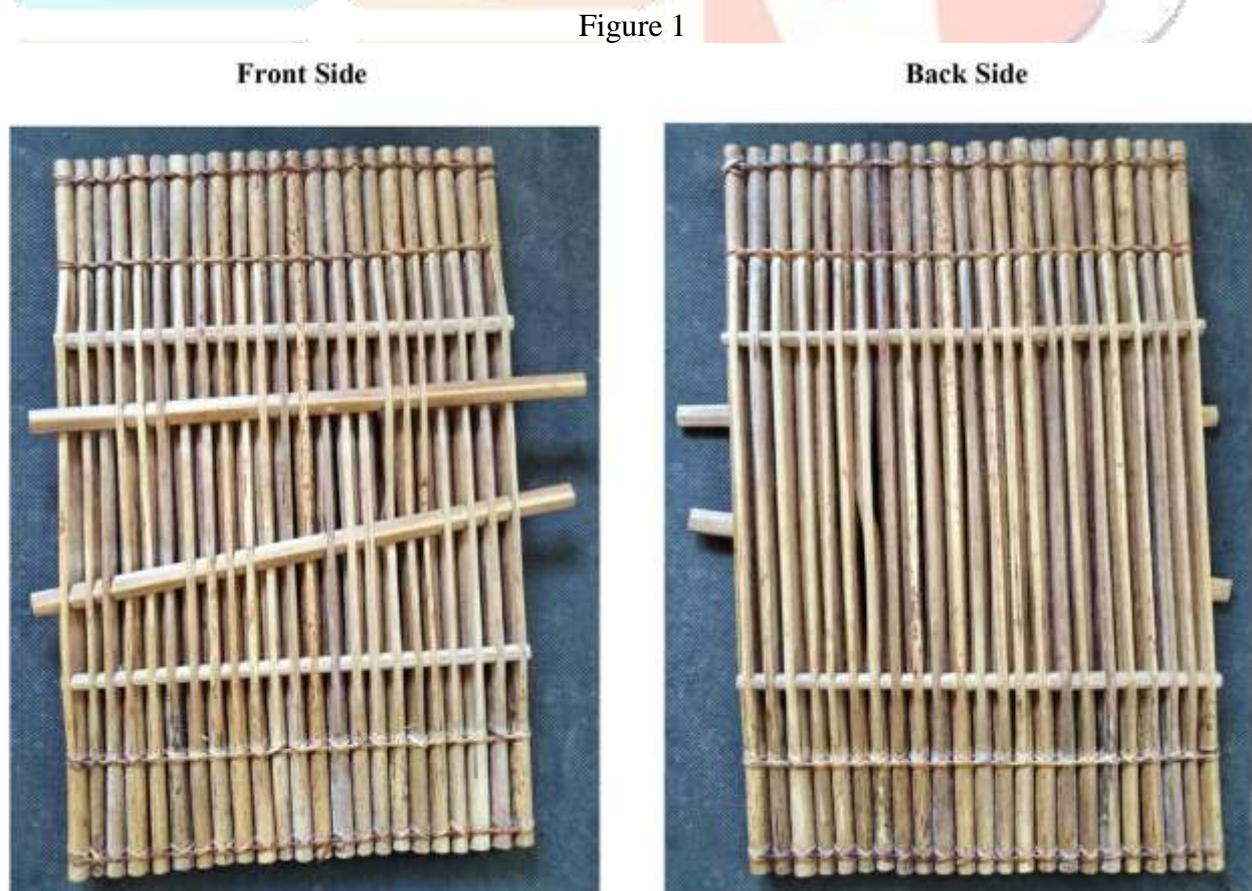
This research study is based on a qualitative method. Since the availability of the instrument is isolated to only a few areas in the East Khasi Hills District of Meghalaya, India therefore, the area of the study is confined to only those areas where the instrument is available. Purposive sampling and snowball sampling methods were utilized. In-depth interviews with folk musicians and wise elders were conducted to gather primary information regarding the subject. Simultaneously, secondary data were collected from books, audio-visual documentation, audio recordings, and YouTube videos. Descriptive analysis was utilized to locate the accessibility and examine the uses of the Ka 'Singphong. A comparative analytical method was also used to compare the usage of Ka 'Singphong and other Khasi folk musical instruments in various published music recordings. Data were analyzed and interpreted accordingly using thematic analysis.

VII. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results and discussion of the study can be interpreted as follows:

i. Origin of Ka 'Singphong

It is difficult to trace back the origin of Ka 'Singphong however the research participants are of the opinion that perhaps Ka 'Singphong came into existence when the Khasi race itself existed. By looking at the structure of the instrument, it is observed that perhaps there might be some influences from the neighboring tribes like the Dimasas of Assam and the Garos since these tribes also use this musical instrument. The Garos call this instrument the Kimjim or the Dimchrang and the Dimasa call it the Khramdubung. The influence from the Garo tribe and the Dimasas of Assam is only from the crafting point of view but the ideology and playing technique may be different.



ii. Accessibility and Usage of Ka 'Singphong

The 'Singphong as a folk instrument is seen and played only in a few areas of the East Khasi Hills District of the state. This instrument can be found only in a few villages in the War area such as Pynai, Mawbeh, Lyndem, Mawlyndun, Mawlam, Wahkhen, and some villages in the Khatar Shnong area. One of the participants from Krohiawhiar village recalled that earlier Ka 'Singphong was commonly used in his village; however, at present this instrument is no longer available. At the same time, there is a scarcity of people who can play this instrument in these areas, especially among the youth. In the urban sector, this instrument is found only in museums and just as a showpiece in people's living rooms.

The usage of Ka 'Singphong can be divided into two aspects i.e. during the early days and the current usage. During the early days, Ka 'Singphong was used as an instrument to play at home after a hard day's work to relieve the fatigue and tiredness of the body. It is used as an accompaniment for making a child dance on the mother's lap or even to train the child to be ready with the dancing steps before any dance festival. Occasionally it is also played for accompanying the guidance of elderly folks to their young ones about moral values and ethics in life. Ka 'Singphong is also used during Ka Shad Kiew ĩing or the housewarming ceremony celebrated by the family.

In today's generation, Ka 'Singphong is seldom used. As mentioned earlier this instrument is usually used during the housewarming ceremony however, at present only a few households would host Ka Shad Kiew ĩing which resulted in less usage and performance of the instrument. The coming of the radio, television, and especially the internet no doubt has a positive contribution to people's lives however, in turn has diminished the practical usage of musical instruments since people would prefer to entertain themselves through various social media platforms instead of playing or listening to the music played on this instrument.

iii. An Isolated Folk Musical Instrument

As mentioned earlier, initially Ka 'Singphong was found only in a few villages and is confined to only the four walls of the family. The study found that various factors contributed to the isolation of this instrument.

Observing the tonality of the instrument, it is found that Ka 'Singphong is a soft-sounding instrument and perhaps this is the main reason that it is usually played only inside the house. Another musical instrument of the Khasis is Ka Duitara which is also known as a home musical instrument. This instrument is also a soft-sounding instrument and, is usually played around the hearth. However, Ka Duitara is now one of the most popular musical instruments and can be seen in various performing platforms. Perhaps the Khasi people classified them as home musical instruments because they are played only inside the house. Earlier there were no sound systems that could amplify the sound of these instruments to make them audible to the audience if played in an open arena. With the current technology available in this day and age, Ka 'Singphong should no longer be confined within the four walls of the family and its pleasant sound must be heard by one and all.

As far as crafting is concerned, the study found that there were only a handful of craftsmen who could make Ka 'Singphong at the same time and still practice today. The scarcity of good raw materials is also another factor that craftsmen encounter. These craftsmen believe that to obtain a good sound of the musical instrument, the raw materials such as the bamboo are cut and crafted only during the winter season because as per observation if cutting of the bamboo is done in other seasons the instruments are easily destroyed by termites. Therefore, the production of the instrument is also very less which has also contributed to the unpopularity and unavailability of the instrument. Examining these factors perhaps proper guidance using scientific methods in crafting is the need of the hour for craftsmen to counteract these issues.

Playing the instrument is yet another major element that one should look into. The study found that the number of musicians who can play Ka 'Singphong is declining day by day, especially the skilled performers. The participants are of the opinion that playing the instrument is complicated. One has to have a good sense of rhythm at the same time, determination and consistency in practicing the instrument. As per their observation, there is a lack of interest amongst the people especially the youth to learn this instrument. Perhaps musicians have not ventured into the essence and scope that this instrument can provide as far as music and music performance are concerned. Simultaneously, a lack of awareness programs and proper music lessons for learning the instrument which are easy to access may have also contributed to the unpopularity of the instrument. Many organizations and music institutions have conducted awareness programs and workshops on other Khasi musical instruments however, the study found that there are only a

few academic institutions that have taken the initiative to organise workshops on learning how to play Ka 'Singphong which was attended by the music students of the institution. The study also found that a few of the musicians hailing from War areas have recently started teaching Ka 'Singphong at home and in music schools. Documentation about the instrument in various forms can also be seen.

Figure 2



Stage performance is one of the platforms which creates awareness at the same time conserving and promoting any art form. It is observed that Khasi musical instruments such as Ksing, Bom, Duitara, Besli, and other Khasi musical instruments were frequently utilized both in live performances as well as studio recordings. However, that has not happened with Ka 'Singphong. Though an initiative was taken by some event management teams where a slot on Ka 'Singphong performance can be seen in a few cultural festivals in the city, the instrument still requires special attention as far as conservation and promotion are concerned. One of the participants opines that perhaps, one of the reasons that Ka 'Singphong is not popular is the doubting of the instrument by the musicians themselves. As mentioned earlier this is an instrument used at home, therefore, the musicians feel that perhaps bringing it on stage as a stand-alone performance or as an accompaniment instrument may have no effect.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The isolation of Ka 'Singphong does not occur only from a single factor however, collective factors such as playing the instrument only within the four walls of the family, non-availability of raw materials, unscientific crafting process, lack of interest in learning the instrument, influences of music from other cultures through social media, less skilled practitioner, tonality and so on may have contributed towards the isolation of Ka 'Singphong. There may be more factors that one should delve into for a better outcome of Ka 'Singphong.

As mentioned earlier, though Ka 'Singphong is a soft-sounding instrument, it can produce a pleasant and fascinating sound when played correctly. The various pitches that the instrument can produce add color and bring life to the music and the rhythm section. Technically analyzing the instrument, there are a lot of scopes that one can implement in the instrument, especially from the performance perspective.

As stated earlier, crafting is also one aspect that musicians can look at, however, one can sit with a craftsman and provide suggestions and comments on developing the instrument to produce a good quality instrument that can be used in live performances and studio recording. The same can be done by composers as Solomon (2016) stated that the composer who understands the strengths and weaknesses of each instrument will have far more success in composition and orchestration [11]. No matter what improvements are made, the folk element should be preserved as this can help uplift the usage of the instrument. However, conserving and promoting Ka 'Singphong involves collective effort. The craftsmen, performers, teachers,

learners, scholars, stakeholders, government, and the community are interdependent. It is the sole responsibility of the community as a whole to uplift, promote, and sustain what the ancestors have provided.

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