

EXPLORING MUSIC OF THE KIRATA KHAMBU-RAI COMMUNITY: *ḌOLOKUPMĀ*

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Abstract

The Kirata Khambu-Rai community, native to the Eastern Himalayan region, possesses a rich cultural heritage, including oral traditions called Mundhum. However, the community's musical traditions, particularly the sacred Ḍolokupmā, remain unexplored. As modernization and urbanization threaten its existence, this study aims to document and analyze Ḍolokupmā, a near-extinct musical tradition, highlighting its cultural, spiritual, and social significance. A qualitative ethnomusicological approach was employed, with fieldwork conducted in Ranka, Rinchenpong, Mangalbaria and Gangtok, areas known for preserving Kirata traditions. Data collection involved in-depth interviews and audio-video recordings with shamans, elders, and local musicians, alongside focus group discussions simulating traditional performances. The Ḍolokupmā lyrics were collected in Devanagari, transliterated using IAST, and translated into English. The music is transcribed into staff notation. The findings revealed that Ḍolokupmā serves as a medium for oral history, nature worship, and social cohesion. This tradition is made available to a worldwide audience through musical transcription, transliteration, and translation. Despite its endangered status, the documentation of Ḍolokupmā contributes to global ethnomusicology, offering a framework for preserving similar traditions. The study calls for further interdisciplinary research and community-driven preservation efforts to safeguard this cultural relic from extinction.

Keywords: Kirata, Mundhum, oral-traditions, ethnic music, Khambu, Rai.

INTRODUCTION

THE KIRATA KHAMBU-RAIS

The Kirata Khambu-Rais are native to the Eastern Himalayan region and are primarily found in North Bengal, Sikkim, and Nepal today. They were known as Kiratas in ancient times. Today, the Khambu-Rais are the descendants of the ancient Kiratas of the Kirata Kingdom (Rai, 2005; Subba, 2015). It is believed that the Kiratas ruled for 29 generations from approximately 900 BCE to 300 CE with Yalamber being the first Kirata King. However, this data varies between historians and scholars, with the start of the Kirata empire going up to the 2000s and 3000s BCE, according to researchers and authors like G.P. Singh and Jas Raj Subba.

The Khambu-Rais have their own distinct religion, which is like animism but not quite the same (S. Rai & Rai, 2020). The religion is governed by oral scriptures passed down from generation to generation orally called the *Mundhum*. They are nature and ancestor worshippers. The *Mundhum* recitations are musical and often accompany musical instruments.

MUSIC OF THE KHAMBU-RAIS: *ḌOLOKUPMĀ*

Music plays an important role in the lives of people in the community. In many facets of the community's life, including spirituality and religion, festivals and celebrations, marriages and births, events and gatherings, and farming and agriculture, it is essential. It serves as an essential conduit for social cohesiveness, identity development, and cultural expression. Music becomes both a reflection of and a means of perpetuating a community's legacy through its rhythms, melodies, and lyrics.

A rich tradition based on *Mundhum* is *Ḍolokupmā*, which is performed before moving into a newly constructed house. The word literally means “security”. In addition to asking for protection, strength, and blessings for the new home, it is done to ward off any evil that might be present in the new site. Different areas of the house are worshipped right from the heart of the house, which is the *Mang-Kotha/Samkha-Kotha/Pitra-Kotha* (sacred worship room), to the pillars, roofs and the areas around the house. Music plays an important role in its rendition as a group of people led by elders and *Mangpa* (shaman) sing *Ḍolokupmā* and dance around the house. The major traditional musical instruments played are *ken* (Rai dhol/drum), *maniken* (jhyamta/cymbals),

Chembi ken (Kaas ko thaal/ Copper alloy plate) and *saya ken* (Dhyangro/Drum). Other instruments may also be played.

MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS USED BY THE RAI COMMUNITY PEOPLE

- Ken/Dhol/Kensungphuk/Baara ken (drum made of wood and leather)
- Mani ken – Jhyamta – Majri ken – Chaamukhi (cymbals)
- Chari baaja (bamboo wind instrument)
- Yalambar Ken - Yalambar Baaja - Yelaken - Bahu ken (bamboo percussive instrument)
- Binayo (small bamboo instrument)
- Murchunga (metal instrument like jew's harp)
- Sayaken – Dhyangro (drum made of wood and leather)
- Murali (bamboo flute)
- Chembiken – Kaas ko thaal (copper alloy plate)k
- Sumba – Sumbak – Paat baaja (leaf used as instrument)
- Siringma/Seleme Baaja (percussion metal instrument)
- Madal (double headed drum)
- Bimbili (flute like instrument)

LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite the fact that a great deal of research and documentation has been done on the Kirata Khambu-Rai tribe, little is known about the musical elements of the community. Singh (2008), J. R. Subba (2015), T. B. Subba (2001), Chatterji (1951), Kirkpatrick (1969), Pradhan (2009), Risley (1894), S. K. Rai (2005), S. Rai (2016), S. Rai & Rai (2020), D. B. Rai (2012), Balaram Rai (2021), Bain (2018), Y. Rai (2012), B. Rai (2018) and Chemjong (2014) have contributed well to the study of the community. Some of these are historical texts, while others focus on language, culture, and ancestor worship, as well as the divides within the community (clans and sub-clans). However, no focus has been given to music or the musical culture of the community. Hence, it becomes essential for documentation and research to take place in such a field.

The Kirata Khambu-Rai community, primarily focusing on their history, culture, oral traditions, and social organization, while leaving the musical aspects largely unexplored. Singh (2008) and J. R. Subba (2015) provided detailed accounts of the Kirata's historical origins and their cultural practices, highlighting the importance of oral traditions like *Mundhum*, though they did not delve into the role of music. Similarly, T. B. Subba (2001) and Pradhan (2009) examined the Kirata's sociopolitical history and the impacts of external influences, such as the Gorkha conquests, but without specific attention to their musical traditions.

Schlemmer (2019), Chatterji (1951) and S. Rai & Rai (2020) explored the *Mundhum* as an integral part of Kirata spirituality and rituals, emphasizing its oral and performative nature but offering no detailed analysis of its musical elements. Kirkpatrick (1969) provided early ethnographic descriptions of Kirata customs and festivals, and S. K. Rai (2005) elaborated on their clan systems, rituals, and festivals, both of which mention music only in passing. S. Rai (2016) and D. B. Rai (2012) acknowledged the importance of music in rituals and festivals but focused more on the challenges modernization poses to preserving these traditions.

Bain (2018) and Balaram Rai (2021) emphasized the Kirata's rich oral narratives and folklore, discussing their cultural significance but omitting deeper musical insights. Y. Rai (2012) noted the erosion of traditional

practices, including music, due to generational shifts and urbanization. Chemjong (2014) documented myths and rituals, hinting at music's role in spiritual practices but without further exploration.

Collectively, these works provide a foundational understanding of the Kirata Khambu-Rai's cultural richness but reveal a critical gap in addressing the community's musical heritage, especially the analysis of traditions like *ḍolokupmā*. This highlights the necessity for ethnomusicological research to fill this void.

CURRENT SCENARIO

The ongoing transformation of society by urbanization, modernization, and globalization puts many ethnic groups' rich cultural legacies in danger of being lost or neglected. Same way many of the rich cultural heritage of the Khambu-Rai community is on the brink of extinction. Music of no different. Many traditional songs have been forgotten and lost. Dolokupma is one such example of a lost song. There is only one place in Sikkim where it is still practised. There is a lack of research and documentation on this field which makes it extremely important to preserve what's left of the rich traditions passed down since ancient times.

The utilization of native instruments, melodies, and rhythms defines the Rai people's unique musical traditions. The research and documentation of these components contribute to the global repertoire of world music by providing musicians, ethnomusicologists, and artists with fresh viewpoints and sources of inspiration. The value this paper adds is the contribution to world music and world knowledge. By studying and recording Rai music, this paper ensures that at least a part of their cultural heritage is preserved for future generations.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this study employed a qualitative ethnomusicological approach to document and analyze the *ḍolokupmā* musical tradition of the Kirata Khambu-Rai community.

Field work Area:

Fieldwork was conducted in Ranka, Rinchenpong, Malgalbarey, and Gangtok. These sites were chosen due to their historical and cultural significance in preserving Rai traditions and their accessibility for researchers.

Data collection:

Data collection methods included a combination of audio-visual recordings, in-depth interviews, participant observations, and focus group discussions. In-depth interviews were conducted with shamans, village elders, and local musicians to gather insights into the historical, spiritual, and cultural significance of *ḍolokupmā*.

Challenges Encountered:

Due to the near-extinction of *ḍolokupmā*, natural performance settings were extremely rare. Instead, a focus group discussion setting was used to simulate traditional performances, ensuring that data could still be gathered authentically.

Scientific Methods of Analysis:

The lyrics of the songs were transcribed in the Devanagari script, as it is a familiar and accurate medium for the Rai language. The lyrics were then translated into English to make them accessible for wider analysis and transliterated using the International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration (IAST) to preserve the correct pronunciation of the original text.

Musical transcription into staff notation was performed using Musescore software, documenting technical aspects such as key signature (E Major), time signature (3/4), tempo (120 bpm), and vocal range (E3–C#4).

A thematic analysis was conducted to explore recurring motifs within the lyrics and musical structures, highlighting the themes of nature worship, spirituality, and community bonding. Due to the rarity of natural performance settings, focus group discussions were arranged, enabling participants to recreate and share the music in a controlled environment.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

ḍolokupmā

Provided by B. B. Rokdung

Transcribed by Siddhant Rai

$\text{♩} = 120$



ḍo lo kup mā ḍo lo kup mā

ḍo lo kup mā ḍo lo kup mā

ḍo ḍo hāṇa chā chā o

nu vāka ci khima ci khima pu vā

pu vā hi ḍā ḍo lo kup mā

ḍo lo kup mā ḍo lo kup mā

ḍo lo kup mā ḍo ḍo

chen luṇa mā ce māṇa luṇa mā o

chen luṇa mā ce māṇa luṇa mā o

hā ri mā o hā kāja o

ḍo lo kup mā ḍo lo kup mā

ḍo lo kup mā ḍo lo kup mā

ḍo ḍo

डोलोकुप्मा

डोलोकुप्मा डोलोकुप्मा डोलोकुप्मा डोलोकुप्मा डो डो

हाडछाछाओ नुवाक चिखिम

चिखिमपुवा पुवा हिडा

डोलोकुप्मा डोलोकुप्मा डोलोकुप्मा डोलोकुप्मा डो डो
छेन्लुडमा चे माडलुडमा ओ
छेन्लुडमा चे माडलुडमा ओ
हारिमा ओ हाकाटओ
डोलोकुप्मा डोलोकुप्मा डोलोकुप्मा डोलोकुप्मा डो डो

IAST transliteration

ḍolokupmā ḍolokupmā ḍolokupmā ḍolokupmā ḍo ḍo
hāṇachāchāo nuvāka cikḥima
cikḥimapuvā puṇvā hiḍā
ḍolokupmā ḍolokupmā ḍolokupmā ḍolokupmā ḍo ḍo
chenluṇamā ce māṇaluṇamā o
chenluṇamā ce māṇaluṇamā o
hārimā o hākāṭao
ḍolokupmā ḍolokupmā ḍolokupmā ḍolokupmā ḍo ḍo

Translation

Security Defense Defense
Man's New house
During the construction of house
Security Defense Defense
The stones chosen are the god stones
They are sharp and dangerous
Security Defense Defense . . .

Musical Analysis:

Key Signature	E Major
Time Signature	3/4
Tempo	Quarter note - 120 bpm
Vocal Range	E3 – C#4
Scale	Do Re Fa So La Do
Technical Description	It is sung mostly in chest voice with a couple of melisma which keeps repeating every few lines. The sung beats are mostly only the first two beats of the $\frac{3}{4}$ time. The third beat usually only sustains the note sung on the second beat.

DISCUSSION

The transcription of *ḍolokupmā* into staff notation, along with its IAST transliteration and English translation, represents a pivotal aspect of this study, contributing significantly to both the preservation and broader academic engagement with the Kirata Khambu-Rai tradition. The study safeguards the musical structure of *ḍolokupmā* in a universally understood format.

This study has demonstrated that *ḍolokupmā*, an almost-obsolete tradition of the Kirata Khambu-Rai community, is far more than a musical style; it is a cultural relic that encapsulates the history, beliefs, and identity of the community. Through its performance and lyrical themes, *ḍolokupmā* serves as a medium for oral history, spiritual expression, and social unity. The soothing vocal scale of the music and its intrinsic connection to nature evoke a profound sense of harmony, linking the community emotionally and spiritually to their environment.

The research findings reveal that *ḍolokupmā*'s thematic focus on worshipping elements of nature, such as stones and wood used in the construction of the house underscores the community's attachment to nature. Any water body or stream nearby is worshipped along with the environment surrounding the house. Not just the visible but also the invisible, such as local spirits and deities, are invoked for protection, worship, and permission. This connection not only imbues everyday life with sacred significance but also reinforces collective identity and social cohesion. The communal aspects of *ḍolokupmā* performances, which bring people together for shared rituals, also foster a sense of unity and mutual support.

While the study highlights the near-extinct state of *ḍolokupmā*, it stands in contrast to the dynamic evolution of other Kirata musical practices. Subba (2015) noted the adaptation of Rai music into hybrid forms influenced by modernity. This divergence raises important questions about the balance between preservation and evolution in cultural traditions. The findings from this study advocate for deliberate efforts to preserve *ḍolokupmā* in its original form, ensuring its cultural and historical integrity.

The challenges faced during the research process reflect the broader struggle of documenting endangered traditions. The use of focus group discussions to recreate *ḍolokupmā* mirrors the observations made by Y. Rai (2012), who noted the impact of urban migration and generational shifts on the continuity of traditional practices in the Rai community. Kirkpatrick's (1969) early ethnographic work also pointed to the erosion of oral traditions as a precursor to cultural decline, a trend clearly evident in the current state of *ḍolokupmā*.

This study provides a significant contribution to the field of ethnomusicology by filling a critical gap in the documentation of Kirata musical traditions. Unlike previous works by Singh (2008) and S. Rai (2016), which primarily focused on historical and cultural narratives, this research offers a detailed musical analysis of *ḍolokupmā*. The transliteration, transcription, and thematic analysis not only document the tradition but also create a framework for future studies on similar endangered cultural practices. The findings call for further interdisciplinary research, exploring ways to integrate traditional music into contemporary cultural expressions to ensure both preservation and innovation.

This study also acknowledges its limitations, such as the inability to observe *ḍolokupmā* in its natural setting due to its near-extinct status. Focus group discussions, while valuable, could not fully replicate the original performance context. Additionally, the reliance on a limited number of informants may have constrained the scope of the study. Despite these challenges, the research offers a significant foundation for further exploration and preservation of Kirata musical traditions.

CONCLUSION

This research highlights the profound cultural significance of *ḍolokupmā* within the Kirata Khambu-Rai community, showcasing its role as a vehicle for oral history, spirituality, and social cohesion. This study

contributes to the growing body of work on indigenous cultural traditions, emphasizing the critical need for their preservation in the face of modernization.

The transcription, transliteration, and translation efforts ensure that this tradition is accessible to a global audience, fostering both preservation and academic engagement. However, the near-extinct status of *ḍolokupmā* underscores the urgency of recording and revitalizing such endangered traditions.

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