

MANIPURI PENA MUSIC: TRADITION, RITUAL AND CULTURAL CONTINUITY

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ABSTRACT

The Pena is one of the oldest indigenous musical instruments of Manipur, deeply embedded in the cultural and spiritual fabric of Manipuri society. The Pena, bowed string instruments of Northeast India, functions not merely as a musical instrument but as a cultural text that encodes the oral traditions, cosmological beliefs, and collective memory of Manipuri society. Drawing upon both primary sources such as oral narratives, ritual practices, and ethnographic observations; secondary materials from scholarly works, the study applies a historical, ethnographic, and cultural framework to analyze the multifaceted role of the Pena. The discussion highlights its central position in rituals like Lai Haraoba, its symbolic role as a mediator between the human and divine, and its significance in shaping communal identity. At the same time, the paper addresses contemporary challenges to its survival in the face of globalization and declining interest among the younger generation. Finally, it evaluates ongoing revivalist efforts, arguing that safeguarding the Pena is crucial to maintaining Manipur's intangible cultural heritage while adapting it to the modern world.

Keywords: Folk tradition, Intangible cultural heritage, Lai Haraoba, Manipuri music, Pena.

Introduction

Music has always played a vital role in shaping the cultural identity of Manipur. Among its diverse forms, the *Pena* stands out as one of the most ancient and significant instruments. More than a musical device, it functions as a cultural emblem, representing continuity of tradition, oral narratives, and spiritual practices. The Manipuri Pena is a traditional, ancient, bowed mono-stringed folk musical instrument from Manipur, India. It is a chordophone with a bamboo body and a coconut shell resonator, played with a bow, and holds deep cultural significance among the Meitei community and other indigenous groups. The Pena is integral to rituals, folk stories, festivals like Lai Haraoba and other traditional ceremonies. It is considered one of the oldest indigenous instruments in Manipur, believed to have existed since at least the 1st century AD, and is symbolic of the cultural heritage and oral traditions of the region. The *Pena khongba* (pena performer) not only entertains but also acts as a cultural custodian, safeguarding the myths, cosmologies, and collective memory of Manipuri society. This paper highlights the history and development, composition, challenges face by the artiste and future prospects.

Objectives

The present study on Manipuri *Pena* music is guided by the following objectives:

- To trace the historical origins and development of the *Pena* as a traditional instrument of Manipur.
- To analyze the cultural and ritual significance of *Pena* music, especially in festivals like *Lai Haraoba*.
- To evaluate the challenges faced by this tradition in the modern context of globalization and digital music.

Materials and Methodology

This study is based on both **primary** and **secondary materials**.

- **Primary Materials** include oral traditions, folk narratives, and performance practices of *Pena* music, as observed in ritual contexts such as *Lai Haraoba*. Accounts from *pena khongba* performers, cultural documentation, and ethnographic notes have been considered.
- **Secondary Materials** include scholarly works on Manipuri music and culture such as Byron's *Dance, Music, and Ritual of Manipur* and Devi's *Traditional Musical Instruments of Manipur*, as well as journal articles on ethnomusicology and cultural heritage preservation.

The methodology adopted is interdisciplinary:

- A **historical approach** is used to trace the origins and evolution of the *Pena*.
- An **ethnographic perspective** is applied to analyze its role in rituals and community practices.

This combined methodology enables a holistic understanding of the *Pena* as both a musical instrument and a cultural symbol of Manipur.

Research Methodology

This study employs a **qualitative research design** aimed at understanding the cultural, ritual, and historical dimensions of *Pena* music in Manipur. The research methodology is structured into three primary phases: data collection, analysis, and interpretation. The methods used are interdisciplinary, combining ethnographic fieldwork, historical inquiry, and textual analysis to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the instrument's role in Manipuri society.

Historical Background of Pena

Historically, the *Pena* was not just a musical instrument but also an integral part of royal courts and ceremonies. It remains uncertain who was the original creator or introducer of the *pena* in Manipur; however, multiple sources indicate that the *pena* has been present since the 1st century A.D. It is believed that Leinung Tharak Asheiba was the inaugural *pena* singer at the court of the first Meitei king, Nongda Lairen Pakhangba. *Pena* players often accompanied Kings and Queens, participating in royal tours and narrating heroic tales and creation myths through their songs. *Pena* musicians were also trained martial arts who protected royalty during their performances. The instrument played a vital role in various ceremonies such as birth, death rituals, as well as in the *Lai Haraoba* festival, a major cultural and religious event celebrating creation myths and ancestral spirits. The *Pena* was traditionally widespread, with almost every village having a *Pena* player or hiring one when needed. It was a source of solace and cultural identity, creating a strong oral tradition by storytelling through songs known as *Pena Eshei* (*Pena* song). These performances connected listeners with their mythology, history, and natural surroundings.



Figure 1. *Pena* instrument (Source: Wikipedia)

The decline of the *Pena* tradition began during the Burmese occupation of Manipur until 1826, after which Maharaj Gambhir Singh revived the art form, with subsequent rulers nurturing and popularizing it further. Renowned *Pena* masters performed extensive recitals, extending the art's reach and enriching its repertoire. In contemporary times, the *Pena* faced a decline with modernization and sociopolitical unrest impacting cultural practices. However, recent revival efforts led by cultural organizations and the Lainingthou Sanamahi Temple Board aim to restore the *Pena* by establishing dedicated training centers and promoting its performances at festivals, thus ensuring its legacy continues.

Thus, the development of the Manipuri *Pena* spans from ancient mythological origins and royal patronage to ritualistic and entertainment functions, facing decline and ongoing revival, deeply embedding it within Manipuri identity and heritage.

Components of Pena

The *Pena* has two main components: the body (*Maru*), associated with Mother Earth, and the bow (*Cheijing*), symbolizing the Father Sky. Its sound is regarded as sacred, historically believed to bring creation and to fill listener's hearts with satisfaction and spiritual connection. The instrument's playing form and appearance resemble other Indian traditional bowed instruments such as the *Ravanahatha*. *Pena* players historically accompanied kings, participated in rituals, and were even regarded as protectors and martial artists. Today, its use continues mainly during cultural festivals, religious ceremonies, and folk performances, though it is a dying art with a limited number of active players. Efforts to revive and preserve *Pena* music are ongoing through organizations dedicated to traditional Manipuri arts.

The instrument is also known by other names depending on the ethnic group, such as *Tingtelia* or *Labum*. The *Pena* traditionally combines spiritual, cultural, and entertainment roles in Manipuri society. The Manipuri *Pena* is constructed primarily using natural materials symbolically linked to elements of the earth and sky. Its main components include:

- The body (called "*Maru*"): Made of a split bamboo tube fashioned into a bowl shape, serving as the main resonator of the instrument. It is associated with Mother Earth.

- The faceplate or resonator cover: Traditionally crafted from a coconut shell which acts as a sound box and amplifier for the instrument's sound.
- The string: A single string made from horsehair or metal wire stretched along the length of the bamboo body.
- The bow (called "Cheijing"): Also made from bamboo and horsehair, used to play the string by drawing it across to produce sound. The bow symbolizes the Father Sky.

The instrument's design is simple yet symbolic, with the combination of bamboo and coconut shell resonating a unique folk sound deeply associated with Manipuri culture and rituals. The Pena is a bowed string instrument often standing approximately 3 to 4 feet tall, with a curved bamboo neck and coconut resonator at the base. These components together create the Pena's distinctive sound that is not only musical but also carries spiritual and cultural meaning for the Manipuri people.

Pena compare to the Ravanahatha

The Pena and Ravanahatha are all traditional bowed string instruments with some similarities but also distinct differences rooted in their cultural origins and construction.

Pena:

- Mono-stringed lute category instrument from Manipur, India.
- Body made of bamboo with a coconut shell resonator, covered partly by dried animal skin.
- The bow resembles an archery bow and often has metal bells.
- Deeply connected to Manipuri ritual and folk traditions, especially used in the Lai Haraoba festival.
- Produces a sacred, folk sound.

Ravanahatha:

- Ancient bowed instrument from India and Sri Lanka, considered an ancestor of the violin.
- Sound box can be a gourd, coconut shell, or hollowed wooden cylinder with animal hide membrane.
- Usually has 1 to 4 strings made of gut, hair, or steel, sometimes with sympathetic strings.
- Bow is horsehair and can vary in length.
- Linked to legend of King Ravana; used historically by royal families and street musicians.
- Historically important in North Indian and Sri Lankan folk music.

Comparison:

The two are bowed string instruments with a single (or few) string(s) producing sound through bowing.

- Pena and Ravanahatha both use natural resonators like coconut shells and membranes of animal hide.
- Pena's bow resembles an archery bow with distinctive features such as metal bells, while Ravanahatha's bow is horsehair-based more like classical bows.
- Ravanahatha may have more strings (up to 4 or more) and sympathetic strings compared to Pena's single string.
- Pena is specific to Manipuri rituals and suffering a dying tradition, while Ravanahatha has broader historical presence in Indian and Sri Lankan music cultures and some revival in modern music.

In essence, the Pena, Ravanahatha, share structural and functional qualities as mono-stringed or few-stringed bowed instruments but differ in cultural context, string number, resonator types, and playing traditions.

Pena in Lai Haraoba festivals

During the Lai Haraoba festival, the Pena is played as an essential musical and ritualistic element. The instrument is bowed by drawing the bow across its single string while pressing on the string to produce different pitches, allowing for expressive and emotive melodies. These melodies accompany dances, rituals, and ceremonies that celebrate creation myths, ancestral deities, and the spiritual essence of the community. The Pena's sound is believed to have sacred significance, and it is closely associated with spiritual control during the festival. For example, when the spirit medium (maibi) is possessed by a deity, pulling the Pena's string can help calm and control the maibi's state. The instrument is considered a visible connection between the spiritual and

material worlds, symbolizing the union of the Supreme Father (Guru) and Mother (Leimarel), which is central to the festival's mythological themes.



Figure 2. Manipuri Pena artist (Source: abhirpothi)

Traditionally, the Pena player sits and plays the instrument either in open verandas or special ritual spaces. The music ranges from invocation to storytelling through songs that communicate spiritual messages, folklore, and communal narratives. The Pena thus acts not only as an accompaniment but also as a sacred tool integral to the ritual's proper performance and the maintenance of cultural heritage.

In summary, the Pena during Lai Haraoba is:

- Played with a bow across a single string with pitch modulation for expressive music.
- Used to accompany dances, storytelling, and ritual enactments celebrating creation and deities.
- Considered a sacred instrument that helps control spirit mediums during possession.
- Symbolizes the spiritual union and sustains the universe in the festival's context.
- Central to preserving the Meitei people's intangible cultural heritage and identity.

Declining of Pena Music

The decline in Pena playing, referring to the traditional Manipuri Pena musical instrument, is primarily due to modernization and changing cultural preferences. Younger generations are less inclined to learn and play the Pena, opting instead for contemporary and popular music forms. Additionally, there is a shortage of dedicated teachers and practitioners to pass on the skill, coupled with limited platforms for performance and recognition. The lack of economic incentives and urban migration also contribute to the decline.

Currently, the number of traditional Pena players is very low and regarded as a dying art. Estimates suggest only a handful of authentic Pena players remain who continue the practice seriously, mostly elderly or a small group engaged in preservation efforts. Various cultural organizations are trying to revive interest, but the art form remains at risk.

Summary:

- Decline due to modernization, disinterest among youth, fewer teachers, and economic challenges.
- Only a small number of traditional Pena players remain, mainly elder musicians and dedicated revivalists.

Efforts are underway to preserve and revive the Pena culture, but the art is endangered.

Laihui and Khangembam Mangi Singh

The revival efforts led by Laihui (an organisation) and the legendary Pena maestro Khangembam Mangi Singh, popularly known as Guru Pena Mangi, have been highly influential in preserving and popularizing the Manipuri Pena tradition. Khangembam Mangi Singh played a vital role in founding Laihui in 1985, a research and performance center dedicated to traditional Manipuri music, dance, and theatre. He tirelessly promoted the Pena art by performing widely both locally and internationally, including in countries like Mexico, the USA, UK, Germany, and France. He introduced innovative performance styles such as "Ukai Kappa" and "Lamjel" within Laihui, expanding the expressive reach of Pena music. As a teacher and Guru at the Jawaharlal Nehru Manipur Dance Academy, he trained many young Pena artists, including female performers, helping produce scholarship recipients and award-winning students. He also worked as an instructor at traditional institutions linked to the royal Manipuri cultural heritage. His students carry forward his legacy of Pena performance.

Khangembam Mangi Singh received numerous prestigious awards in recognition of his contributions, including the Padma Shri (2011), Sangeet Natak Akademi Award (2006), and various Manipuri cultural honors. His dedication effectively brought the *Pena* out of the brink of extinction and into continued relevance in modern times. The collective revival efforts by Laihui under his guidance have successfully maintained *Pena* as a living tradition by integrating it into academic, cultural, and performance platforms, promoting wider awareness and active practice among newer generations.

Contemporary Relevance and Challenges

With the rise of modern entertainment and digital music, traditional instruments like the *Pena* face challenges of decline. Fewer youths are trained as *pena khongba*, leading to concerns about cultural discontinuity. However, revivalist efforts have emerged, including cultural festivals, research initiatives, and state-sponsored heritage programs. UNESCO's emphasis on safeguarding intangible cultural heritage provides a framework through which the *Pena* can be preserved and promoted in both local and global contexts.

Conclusion

Manipuri *Pena* music is not only a form of artistic expression but also a repository of history, spirituality, and collective identity. As one of the oldest living traditions of Manipur, it serves as a bridge between past and present, myth and reality, ritual and performance. Preservation of *Pena* music requires both institutional support and community engagement, ensuring that this cultural treasure continues to inspire future generations.

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