

Kay (Chyabrung): An important traditional instrument of the Limbu Community: Exploring its cultural significance and Indigenous knowledge system

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Abstract

The Limbu community, one of the prominent indigenous groups of Sikkim, Darjeeling, Kalimpong (WB), North-East India, Bhutan, Burma and Nepal possesses a rich cultural heritage reflected through language, rituals, music, dance, and oral traditions. Among the traditional cultural symbols of the Limbu people, the Kay or Chyabrung occupies a significant position as an important musical instrument and maker of the cultural identity. More than a drum, Kay or Chyabrung represents unity, spirituality, indigenous knowledge, and social harmony within Limbu society. This study examines the historical background, structure, cultural significance, ritual importance, and contemporary challenges associated with Kay or Chyabrung. The paper also highlights its role in preserving indigenous knowledge systems and strengthening ethnic identity in modern society.

Keywords: Kay or Chyabrung, Limbu community, indigenous knowledge, cultural identity, Kelang dance, traditional music.

1. Introduction

The Limbu community, one of the major indigenous communities of Sikkim, Darjeeling, North-East India, Burma, Bhutan and Nepal, possesses a rich cultural heritage expressed through language, rituals, dances, songs, and traditional musical instruments. Among these instruments, Kay or Chyabrung occupies a special and sacred position in Limbu society. It is not merely a musical drum but also a symbol of identity, tradition, unity, and cultural continuity.

The Kay (Chyabrung) is widely used during festivals, marriages, rituals, welcome ceremonies, and social gatherings. The rhythmic beats of the Chyabrung create an atmosphere of cultural significance, harmony, and spirituality among the Limbu people. This research explores the origin, structure, cultural, performance style, and present challenges related to the preservation of the Kay or Chyabrung tradition (Subba JR 1999).

2. Objectives of the Study

The major objectives of this paper are:

- To study the historical origin of Kay or Chyabrung).
- To analyze the cultural and ritual significance of Chyabrung in Limbu society.
- To explore the role of Chyabrung in preserving indigenous knowledge and identity.
- To examine the challenges faced in preserving the Chyabrung tradition.
- To suggest measures for the preservation and promotion of Limbu cultural heritage.

3. Methodology

This study is based on qualitative and descriptive methods. Information has been collected from books, journal articles, oral traditions, research papers, and online scholarly sources related to Limbu culture and indigenous knowledge systems.

4. Meaning and Concept of Kay(Chyabrung)

The word “Kay” in Limbu language refers to the “Tiger”. ‘Chyabrung’ is traditional drum. The term “Laang” means “Dance”. They imitate the birds, fishes, and animal’s action and dance accordingly. It is one of the oldest and most respected traditional musical instruments of the Limbu community. According to oral traditions and Mundhum (Limbu scripture), the Chyabrung has been associated with the Limbu way of life since ancient times (Limbu Oral Tradition, 2026).

Indigenous communities across the world preserve their traditions through oral literature, music, dance, rituals, and cultural practices. The Limbu community, belonging to the Trans Himalayan Race, has maintained its unique identity through various traditional practices. One of the most respected cultural elements among the Limbu is the Kay or Chyabrung, a traditional drum used during festivals, rituals, social ceremonies, and cultural performances.

The rhythmic sound of the Chyabrung symbolizes collective harmony and reflects the historical and spiritual worldview of the Limbu people. It is closely connected with the Mundhum, the oral scripture and philosophical foundation of the Limbu community. Kay or Chyabrung serves not only as a musical instrument but also as a medium for transmitting indigenous knowledge, cultural values, and social unity from one generation to another (Chemjong, 2072).

5. Historical origin and Oral traditions

The Kay or Chyabrung is one of the oldest traditional musical instruments of the Limbu community. Oral traditions suggest that its origin dates back to ancient human civilization. According to Limbu folklore, the sound of nature, birds, animals and forest life inspired the creation of the Chyabrung (Chemzong, 2003).

Historically, the instrument has been associated with:

- Agricultural celebrations
- Seasonal festivals

- Marriage ceremonies
- Ritual worship
- Social gatherings

The Chyabrung has remained an inseparable part of Limbu social and cultural life for centuries.

According to one popular belief, after the death of his brother Kesami, Namsami carried his brother's skin to Tibet with the intention of selling it to exchange for salt and grocery items but he was unable to sell that leather. On the return journey, he halted for the night in a dense forest. To protect himself from wild animals and cold weather, he slept inside the hollow tree trunk. During the night, he heard the mysterious buzzing and vibrating sound produce by the wind passing through the hollow wood. The sound deeply surprised and inspired him.

The remembering his beloved brother Kesami, Namsami then decided to cut that Khmari wood (Gmelina arborea) and create a hollow drum or traditional Key with Kesami's leather so that the sound could preserve the memory and the spirit of his brother forever. This belief is often associated with the origin of the Limbu Traditional drum Known as Kay or Chyabrung, Thus, the Chyabrung was invented. This later became important cultural symbol of Limbu community.

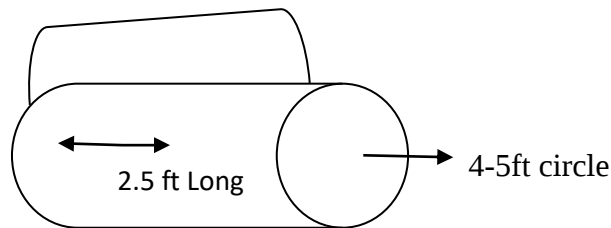
Historically, the Chyabrung has been closely connected with the Limbu civilization, culture, and religious practices. It is deeply rooted in the Mundhum traditions and is considered sacred by the community (Subba, 1999).



Traditional Chyabrung Dance

6. Structure and Construction of Kay(Chyabrung)

The Chyabrung is a cylindrical or oblong-shaped and size of the drum is approximately 2.5ft in length and about 4feet diameter made from hollow wood, traditionally from trees such as Khamari (*Gmelina arborea*). Both ends of the drum are covered with animal skin. Goat skin at the right (Huksangey) and cow or Buffalo skin at left (Singjangay).



Kay or Chyabrung

Main Features:

- Made from hollow wood
- Covered with cow, goat, or buffalo skin
- Hung around the neck using a strap
- Played using one hand and one stick

One side of the drum produces a sharp sound and is played with the palm of the hand, known as Huksagay. The other side produces a deeper bass sound and is played with a stick called Kesari or Singsagay.

During the process of making kay or Chyabrung, several spiritually important sacred materials are traditionally placed inside the drum. According to the beliefs and indigenous knowledge of the Limbu community, the drum is considered incomplete without this rituals (Mangenna) and elements. Some of the important items placed inside the drum include **Sagi, Mendak Hee, Tumdumsaree, Yanglep, Pitchasumbok and Toong lee, Mejak Lung**. These materials are believed to provide spiritual power, purity, protection, and cultural significance to the drum.

In addition, various traditional instrument and tools are required during the preparation and completion of the Kay or Chyabrung. This includes **Hongsing, Sa?horik, Khe?sa, Ka?dang, Pachula, Thowa, Kamta, Rambho Tondey, Tee ren Thay**, and others. Along with these materials such as **Kha?nam, Kesaree, Phungjik, and Sirpong** are also considered necessary in the traditional process of drum making.

Usually there are two types of Kay or Chyabrung are there in Limbu community which are:

1. Yageysing Kay or Chyabrung(Spiritual Use) and

2. Laang Kay or Chyabrung(for Dancing) both differ in size and construction process (Limboo, BM. 2023).



Picture of Yageysing Kay



Picture of Kay(Chyabrung)

7. Ritual and Cultural significance

The Kay or Chyabrung plays a vital role in maintaining social unity among the Limbu people. During festivals and ceremonies, people gather collectively to perform Kaylang dance accompanied by Kay or Chyabrung beats.

Role in Social Unity

- Encourages collective participation

- Strengthens community bonds
- Promotes harmony and cooperation
- Connects younger generations with elders
- Creates shared cultural experiences

The communal performance of Chyabrung reflects the spirit of togetherness and mutual respect within the Limbu society.

Kay or Chyabrung holds sacred importance in Limbu rituals and ceremonies. It is widely used during:

- Chasok Tangnam festival
- Marriage ceremonies
- Housewarming rituals
- Cultural celebrations
- Marriage ceremonies
- Welcome and farewell programs
- Agricultural festivals
- Community gatherings
- Traditional worship and rituals
- Kok phekwa Tumen

Many rituals are considered incomplete without the sound of Kay or Chyabrung. It is believed to create spiritual harmony and invoke blessings from ancestors and nature spirits (Subba, 1999).

8. Kaylang Dance and Performance Tradition

The Chyabrung dance, also called Kelang, is an inseparable part of Limbu culture. The performers dance rhythmically while beating the drum. The dance movements often imitate birds, fish, animals, and natural activities, reflecting the close relationship between the Limbu people and nature.

The Kaylang dance performed with Kay or Chyabrung is one of the most recognized traditional dances of the Limbu community. The dance movements often imitate the action and characters of:

- Birds
- Animals
- Fish
- Agricultural activities
- Natural movements

The dance symbolizes the close relationship between humans and nature in indigenous philosophy. It also serves as a medium of entertainment, celebration, and cultural education (Kainla, 2072). Performed mostly by young men, though women also participate today Includes synchronized footwork and body movements. Accompanied by traditional songs and Palam singing. Symbolizes happiness, prosperity, and unity.

9. Indigenous Knowledge System

Indigenous knowledge refers to traditional wisdom, practices, and beliefs developed by communities over generations. Kay or Chyabrung serves as a medium for preserving and transmitting such knowledge.

I. Knowledge of Nature

The rhythms and dance movements imitate the action of birds, animals, and natural phenomena, reflecting ecological understanding.

II. Oral Tradition

Songs and Mundhum recitations performed with Kay or Chyabrung preserve historical narratives and cultural memory.

III. Ritual Knowledge

Kay or Chyabrung is used in traditional worship and ceremonies guided by indigenous spiritual beliefs.

IV. Social Values

It teaches cooperation, discipline, respect for elders, and collective participation. Thus, Kay or Chyabrung acts as a living repository of indigenous knowledge and cultural continuity.

10. Kay as Symbol of Identity and unity

Cultural identity is one of the defining characteristics of indigenous communities. For the Limbu people, Kay or Chyabrung represents ethnic pride and cultural existence.

- Importance in Identity Formation
- Symbolizes Limbu civilization
- Represents traditional heritage
- Preserves ethnic uniqueness
- Promotes cultural recognition
- Strengthens indigenous consciousness

Today, Kay or Chyabrung performances are showcased during national and international cultural events, helping the Limbu community preserve and promote its identity globally. Just as language and dress signify ethnic identity, the Kay or Chyabrung symbolizes the musical and ritual heritage of the community.

Many scholars consider the Chyabrung as:

A symbol of Limbu civilization

A medium of cultural transmission

A representation of indigenous knowledge

A source of social unity and entertainment

It is also used in modern cultural programs to showcase Limbu heritage nationally and internationally.

11. Challenges in Preservation

Despite its cultural importance, the Kay or Chyabrung tradition faces several modern challenges.

Major Challenges

- Influence of western music and modern entertainment
- Declining interest among youth
- Lack of institutional support
- Commercialization of traditional performances
- Inadequate documentation and research
- Urbanization and migration

These challenges threaten the continuity of traditional Limbu musical heritage. Many scholars and cultural activists have expressed concern that the original ritualistic and sacred values of Kay or Chyabrung are gradually disappearing.

12. Preservation Measures

To preserve Kay or Chyabrung and Limbu indigenous culture, several initiatives are necessary.

Suggested Measures

- Introduce indigenous cultural education in schools and colleges
- Organize Kay or Chyabrung workshops and competitions
- Encourage youth participation
- Digitally document songs, dances, and oral traditions
- Provide government support for indigenous arts
- Promote cultural tourism and research

The active participation of community organizations, scholars, and cultural institutions is essential for safeguarding this heritage. Preservation of Kay or Chyabrung means preservation of Limbu identity, history, and indigenous knowledge (Limboo, BM. 2023).

Conclusion

Kay or Chyabrung is not merely a traditional musical instrument but a symbol of unity, identity, spirituality, and indigenous knowledge system of the Limbu society. I reflect the close relationship between nature and ritual practices. Oral traditions and social harmony within Limbu society. Despite the growing influence of modernization and globalization, The preservation of kay(Chyabrung) remains essentials for safeguarding indigenous heritage and cultural continuity. Proper documentation, institutional support, cultural educations, and active youth participation are necessary for sustaining this unique tradition for future generations,

The rhythmic beats of Kay or Chyabrung continue to preserve the collective memory and cultural values of the Limbu people.

In the modern era of globalization and cultural transformation, preserving Kay or Chyabrung is essential for protecting indigenous heritage and promoting cultural diversity. Through collective efforts, documentation, education, active community participation and governments can help preserve this unique cultural treasure for future generations. The rhythmic sound of the Kay or Chyabrung continues to echo the rich traditions and indigenous wisdom of the Limbu community. The kay or Chyabrung tradition can continue to inspire future generations and sustain the rich cultural identity of the Limbu community. It carries deep cultural, historical, social, and spiritual significance.

Kay (Chyabrung) is one of the most valuable traditional musical instruments of the Limbu community. More than an instrument, it represents the identity, unity, and living heritage of the Limbu people.

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