

# Chyabrung/Ke: A traditional Folk musical Instrument of the Limbu Tribe and its types

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## Abstract

The study explores the traditional musical instruments and popular dance forms of the Limbu (Yakthung) tribes. The traditional instrument “Ke”, also known as “Chyabrung”, and the combination of rhythmic beat along with the dance is called Ke Lang. Ke: Lang is a significant part of the Limbu Culture and reflects the Limbu’s historical identity and cultural heritage.

Among the many folk dances of the Limbus, Ke: Lang is one of the most popular dances. In Ke: Lang, a variety of dance forms are found, with numerous and vibrant displays of synchronised foot and body movements. There are many types of dances found. In this abstract, dance forms are only collected from Sikkim. This study employs a mixed method, including primary and secondary methods.

**Keyword:** Ke/Chyabrung, Ke Lang, Ke: sari, Limbu Mundhum, Ke Pokma Mundhum.

## Introduction

The various kinds of socio-cultural and religious dances performed by the Limboo tribe, along with the instruments, are known as Ke-lang or Chyabrung-lang of the Limboo tribe (Subba, J.R). Chyabrung is a traditional musical instrument of the Limbu community, an indigenous tribe of Sikkim, India, and also residing in the north-eastern part of India, Himalayan regions like Nepal, Bhutan and other countries also. Actually, Chyabrung is called ‘Ke’. “Ke” or “Chyabrung” was mythically and historically made of tiger’s hide with a cylindrical hollow wood. And over time changes the hide was replaced by the skin of other animals, such as Ox, goat, etc.

Chyabrung/Kay has two openings on either end. The left end is made of Ox skin, and the right end is made of Goat skin. The end made of Ox skin produces a flat, bass sound, i.e., Grung (like the roar of a tiger). The other end being made of Goat skin produces a sharp, treble tone, i.e., Chang (Subba, Sandhya).

This is one of the ancient Limbu folk musical instruments, and a combination of Chyabrung, rhythmic beat and dance is called Ke: lang. In the Limboo community, Ke: lang is one of the most popular dances. Sikkim has more than 80 dance forms, all of which imitate birds, animals, and other natural creatures. Mimicking the animals, birds, and living creatures of nature is performed to the rhythmic beat of Ke. Some types are culturally, ritually and spiritually created and are performed accordingly. Every rhythmic beat and every body movement have its own types. Maximum has names. The rhythmic beats of Chyabrung guide the dancers’ movements.

In the rhythm of the Ke, the dancers perform the Ke: lang with Ke carried suspended at the height of the stomach using the strap around the neck, and in some places, it is hung from the left shoulder also. The hands and footwork complete the dance. They use both hands to produce sound; the right hand is called Huk:taphay/Huksangay, or bare hand, and the left hand, which uses Ke:chari/drumsticks, is called

Singchangay, made from Ke: sari Sing (Ke: sari/yellow Sandalwood). There are no prescribed sizes of Ke and Ke: sari, and the sizes may differ from one another; the rhythmic beat of Ke without the Ke: sari is treated as incomplete. The word “Chyabrung” is coined after the sounds that are produced by beating Ke, i.e., Chyang+thum, Chyangthum thumthum. Another is, the roar of the tiger, Chang+grukgruk Chang+grukgruk, meaning “I eat you”.

Originally, the last episode of the myth, Ke Pokma Mundhum, tells of two brothers, Kesami (Tiger) and Namsami (Human). The younger brother made ‘Ke’ in memory of his elder brother Kesami (Keba/Tiger), after his death and from his skin only. The name “Ke” is coined from “Kesami”.

### Historical and Cultural Significance

The Limbu community has various traditional dance forms; the Ke: lang is one of the most popular dances. The sound of the Chyabrung is a source of happy, joyful, positive vibes in their society.

The musical instrument is decorated with colourful clothes and flowers (Subba, J.R).

The origin of the Limbu Ke or Chyabrung is associated with the Limbu Mundhum, i.e., “Ke Pokma Mundhum”. In the same Mundhum, Ipnaso Serangdhana, also known as Tigenzongna, an alpha woman, had two sons, one of whom was a tiger and the other was a human. ‘Ke’ is coined in memory of the elder brother ‘Kesami’ by the younger brother ‘Namsami’. With reference to the ancient history of the Limbu community, Ke already existed before human civilization started. “Pajaiba Thendhungyangba” was the first man in the Limbu community who made a house realizing its importance, looking after the nest of a bird called Chillkhaykma. He made the house to fulfil the promise given to a girl named Luplina-Wedonnama. In his first attempt, he did not succeed because of the termites, and the structure collapsed. He went to Sodungen Lepmuhan Pangbhay in search of new ideas for making a house. Then he was advised to build the main pillar (Murum Sitlang) and also advised to invite the ‘Kelang Hangba or Ke: Sambas; Soden Hangba and Lodem Hangba’ for ‘Thok Thamma’ rituals; similarly, he succeeded. After the completion of the house, Akwanama (housewarming) rituals were followed by the rhythmic beat of Ke called “Thok Thamtham”; he also invited the Kelang Hangba or Ke: Sambas; Soden Hangba and Lodem Hangba for Thok Thamma rituals, which were danced with the rhythmic beat of Ke “Chyang + thum + thum = Chyangthumthum” as “Thak + tham + tham = Thakthamtham”, around the house and around the Murum Sitlang. Thereafter, the Limbu community have faith and beliefs that before shifting to a new house, Akwanama and Thakthamtham rituals are to be followed.

Generally, Ku: sarakpa is a general type, meaning simple steps. The steps of the Chyabrung dance are quite interesting. In Chyabrung, the sole member can also perform Ke: lang, or more than one can also perform it; there are no strict rules regarding the number of dancers. But as per mythology, on any occasion like marriage ceremonies, housewarmings, parties, celebrations, festivals like Chasok Tongnam, Kokphetla Tongnam, Sese CPA Tumen etc., a number forming pairs is treated as auspicious and good luck. In rituals like the ‘Phungshok’ ritual and in ‘Ya: grangsing’, only a single Ke is used; the Ke ones used in Phungshok and in Ya: grangsing (a ritualistic altar) are used in these particular rituals, it cannot be used for other purposes, and it is called Ya: Ke/Ya: Gae.

Basically, any age group, men or women, can participate in Ke: lang; usually, male members participate in the Ke: lang. There are no such strict norms, though in some rituals, or most, males perform the same. In the research on the Chyabrung/Ke dance, the footsteps and body movements are imitated from nature’s living beings themselves. Furthermore, an easy way to understand the forms of Ke: lang is the performance

mimicking the living creatures in the beat of the Chyabrung and movement of the body during the Ke: lang.



**Figure: Ke: Lang dancers holding the Ke**

## Forms and Classification of Limbu Ke: lang

The Limbu community are nature worshipers; they are connected to nature, knowing flora and fauna. Ke: lang has various forms; every form has a mimic of each living creature. According to the Limbu myth, in the beginning, humans also got the idea of making a house from the bird called **Chillkhaykma Pu** (Hill Sparrow), by **Pajaiba Thendhungyangba**, whom he imitated.

For the basic understanding of Ke: Lang is classified in Animalia (one of the basic groups of living things that comprises either all the animals or all the multicellular animals). In-depth research, Ke: Lang is found in Mammalia, Aves, Amphibia, Pisces, Arthropoda, and Annelida. Most of the Ke: Lang forms are mimicked from the Mammalia and the Aves. Another myth is that the Limbu people have faith that the sound of Chyabrung kills the termites; scientifically, it hasn't been proven yet or proven.

The Limboo believe that due to the huge sound of the Chyabrung, the termite insect would be frightened and leave the premises (Muringla, Bal).

Or the wood and the elements used in making Chyabrung, and Ke: chari/drumstick made from yellow sandal wood, may kill the termites. Besides that, dances are also associated with Mundhum and have many forms. Despite that, some rituals only needed rhythmic beat of the Ke, which does not have dance. Some Ke: lang types are culturally and ritually created, which doesn't have particular names.

Forms of Ke; Lang are classified in the Mundhum Group and, according to scientific grouping, i.e., in the Animalia group, are as follows;

**Mundhum Group or Ke; Lang Related to Mundhum:** The origin of Chyabrung is associated with the Limbu Mundhum only. Some beats of Ke are also ritualistic, which do not have dance; only rhythmic beat completes the rituals. Generally, Ku: sarakpa is a general type, meaning simple steps. The steps of the Chyabrung dance are quite interesting. Ke: Lang related to Mundhum are as follows:

1. **Mundhum Group:** - Mundhum is a philosophy of the Limbu community. Ke: Lang related to Mundhum are as follows:

1. **Gnamuk Lang or Gnamuksam Lang:** Dance appreciation of the five organs of the universe, like earth, water, fire, air and light (Muringla, Bal). The five elements of the universe in Chyabrung Lang are called Gnamuk Lang.
2. **Yet hang Lang:** In the Chyabrung dance in memory of Limboo's legendary personality, who had, through volumes of oral Mundhums, created/established a moral, ethical, and social code of conduct among Limboos (Muringla, Bal).
3. **Samba Lang:** "Samba", one of the Shamans of the Limbu community. Samba's main workload in society includes rituals like Yehang Shema Mundum on auspicious occasions and natural death rituals, etc. The mimic of Ke Lang performed by Samba is known as Samba Lang.
4. **Yeba Lang:** "Yeba" is also a type of shaman of the Limbu Community. In Ke Lang, the imitation of the Yeba is called Yeba Lang.
5. **Tung Gu Warang Hom Ma Lang:** "Tung Gu Warang Hom Ma Lang" describes a time when the world was covered by water, and different kinds of species were stuck in the water; they were struggling to find their way. The mimic of worship of evading those situations is known as Tung Gu Warang Hom Ma Lang.
6. **Wajakpu Lang:** "Wajakma" means to cross the water or river. According to Mundhum, Wajakpu Lang is a dance to cross the huge river, which is called Wajakpu Lang (Limboo, Tej Raj).
7. **Wadori Lang:** The mimicking of the dragonfly is known as Wadori Lang.
8. **Akwana Manglang:** Dancers, through dance, appeal to the main deity of the house to bless him so that he can perform well (Muringla, Bal).
9. **Matkam thim Lang or Thokkamgam Lang:** Chyabrung dance during the marriage and around the main pillar (Muringla, Bal).
10. **Langsamafungma Lang:** a dance by which dancers can save their legs from mishap (Muringla, Bal).
11. **Kheray Lang:** a dance performed by a royal stag (Muringla, Bal).
12. **Mang Lang:** "Mang" means "God/Goddess". God (Mang) likes dance (Muringla, Bal).
13. **Singzanggay Lang:** Chanting of Mundhum in Tungdungay rituals; they welcome the Tungdungay Sammam with the beating of the Ke, which is known as Singzanggay Lang.
14. **Thak thama lang:** through dance to wish best wishes during a housewarming function. The Limboo believe that due to the big sound of Chyabrung terminators, insects would be frightened and leave the premises (Muringla, Bal).

## 2. Scientific Grouping, Animalia:

### A. Mammalia group

1. **Yasha Lang** (Himalayan Deer Dance): In Limbu, the Himalayan deer is called Yasha. During the Ke: lang, the imitation of the Yasha is called Yasha Lang.

A dance depicting the movement of the Himalayan deer (Bal Muringla).

2. **Melluk Lang:** In Limbu, sheep are called Melluk. Ke: lang performed imitating the Melluk is called Melluk Lang.
3. **Ken Da Lang:** Do dancers mimic Ken? Da is called Ken? Da Lang.
4. **Takmeba Lang:** Elephant is called Takmeba in the Limbu Language. In Limbu rituals, Takmeba Lang is performed during the incest puja.
5. **Peng: wa Lang:** In the good old days, people walked from one place to another. The faith of depicting Peng:wa Lang is for strength and energy. The dance is called Peng: wa Lang.

6. **Sang: wet Lang:** Mimicking buffalo in Ke: lang is called Sang: wet lang or a dance of the Buffalo.
7. **Men Da Lang:** Mimic of the goat in Chyabrun Lang is called Men Da Lang.
8. **Pongbit Lang:** Pongbit Lang is a dance of the yak, imitated by dancers. Pongpitchhama Lang is a dance by the yak family animal (Bal Muringla).
9. **Oan Lang:** The Beat of Chyabrun with the movement of a horse is called Oan Lang.
10. **Phota Lang:** In the Chyabrun Lang, Phota Lang is also an important dance form in which a rabbit is imitated.
11. **Peachakwa Lang:** Monkey-style dance (Muringla, Bal). A Lang imitating the monkey is known as Peachakwa Lang.

## B. Aves Group

1. **Chillkhiyagkma Lang:** A dance by a bird akin to a sparrow, located in the hills.
2. **Sijuwa Lang:** In Sijuwa Lang, dancers beautifully imitate Sallow birds to the rhythmic beat of Ke/Chyabrun.
3. **Samdangwa Lang:** Samdangwa is a Himalayan bird also known as Samdangwa in Limbu. A dance performed by a bird and its imitation is called Samdangwa Lang.
4. **Yamlakwa Lang:** A dance by crimson color Himalayan dove is an inmate of Chyabrun Lang and is called Yamlakwa Lang.
5. **Muiya Lang:** A dance performed by an eagle is also one of the important types of Chyabrun Lang. The Dancer shows the Eagle dance.
6. **Mora Lang:** Dancers imitate the peacock, which is called mora lang.
7. **Singhekwa Lang:** A dance of a woodpecker is known as Singhekwa Lang. The left hand plays a role in the sound of Sing-ghekghek by Ke: chari.
8. **Parewa Lang:** In the Parewa Lang dance showcase, the dance of the pigeon.
9. **Tikwa Lang:** "Tikwa" is a kind of bird found in the Himalayan belt. Locally known as "jungle chicken" or "wild cock". In Chyabrun Lang, Tikwa Lang performs or mimics the bird that takes or steals the grain from the field.

## C. Pisces Group

1. **Ngabhunji Lang:** Ngabhunji means aquatic animal in the Limbu language. Specifically, Ngabhunji is a type of fish dance, which is imitated in the Chyabrun dance.  
A dance by Aquarian (preferably fish) (Muringla, Bal).
2. **Sek? Gha Lang:** Sek? Gha is a Himalayan stream fish type.

## D. Arthropoda Group

**Charaphemba Lang:** Charaphemba Lang is one of the beautiful dance types of Chyabrun Lang; in this dance, the dancers imitate the butterfly.

## E. Amphibia Group

1. **Warukpa Lang:** Warukpa is an edible frog. In Chyabrun Lang, dancers imitate the Warukpa or edible frog. A dance by an amphibious animal that resembles a frog (Muringla, Bal).
2. **Tana Lang:** Tana means earthworm in the Limbu language. Dancers enthusiastically imitate the earthworm in the dance.
3. **Lakfhat Tuppm Lang:** The leech-removing dance is called Lakfhat Tuppm Lang.

## F. Reptilia Group

**Ashake Lang:** Ashake Lang means snake dance. In this, the dancer imitates the snake.



Picture from Pageant, Sikkim, Mister Limbu: Showcasing the Ke: Lang in a talent show.

Despite the Mundhum and science, other dance types are also there according to ceremonies, functions, rituals, and human beings' day-to-day lives. Like Namphenjong Lang: This dance is one that the people who woke up early in the morning and washed their faces, combed their hair, mimicked in Chyabrung Lang, which is called Namphenjong Lang (Limboo, Tej Raj). In a Limbu marriage, traditionally, Chyabrung is an important instrument that is used in a cultural and ritualistic way. In the cultural sense, it carries huge respect and priority on every occasion, ceremony, etc. And in a ritualistic sense, without the Chyabrung, the marriage couldn't be successful because welcoming the bride into a groom's house, to connect the souls of the bride and groom, is called "Matkam thim". From the start of the marriage ceremony to the end, Chyabrung is especially needed. Ritually with respect, even the bride and groom have to take lunch and bring to the same place. La:iyongma Lama, Ta:ray Pongma etc. And at the end of the day or ceremony, there is a special beat of the Chyabrung, which denotes the end of the day.

Some dances are beyond animal mimicry; or related to the Yakthung Mundhum, and some are created by the people in a sarcastic way, which attracts the audience. Some rituals only needed rhythmic beat of the Ke which does not have dance. A few dances are as follows;

- A. Mencheen Upma Lang:** While dancing, young boys use dance to attract young girls, which is called Mencheen Upma Lang.
- B. Lam Ke Lang:** Lam means "road or footpath". A Chyabrung dance during the road march is called Lam Ke Lang.
- C. Lamlaama Lang:** "Lamlaama" means to receive someone. A dance performed during the welcoming of someone (Muringla, Bal).
- D. Nassae Healing Lang (ear ring dance):** Nassae gold is a big, round-shaped ornament, mostly used by Limboo people (Muringla, Bal).
- E. Shyaphona Lang:** This is an ending dance in the Chyabrung Lang.

## Recommendations and Suggestions:

In conclusion, this research enhances and explores the unique traditional dance of the Limbu community. As we know, culture, traditions are our roots to our ancestors. Like folklore has its roots and origin in one's community. The musical instrument Chyabrung/Ke is a source of pride for the Limbu community.

It is deeply rooted among the Limbu people because, before the Limbu people started to live in houses or before the knowledge of building houses, the Limbu people had this instrument. This is connected to the fact that they used to live in caves before building houses. Proved that the instrument is also as old as the Limbu people.

According to the Limbu myth, in the origin and history of the Chyabrung, mothers played a vital role, without advocacy. Likewise, in the ancient Limbu society, women played a crucial role in society, and it is clear that it was a matrilineal society during that period.

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

The motive to write the article on this particular topic is that the myth of the Chyabrung has something that is scientifically related but hasn't been proven yet, because while making the Chyabrung, especially the Hong Sing in the Limbu language, Kamari in the Nepali Language, a tree is needed.

More than six materials are inserted inside the Chyabrung; some materials are spiritually and religiously believed to provide protection from evil spirits. Like goat droppings are religiously believed to be a medicine (Subba, Sandhya). A combination of the Ke and Ke Chari is made from the yellow sandalwood. Did the sound kill the termites, or will the instrument and inserted materials kill the termites? But, from ancient times, the Limbu people have faith, belief, respect, legacy, complexity, versatility, pride, sophisticated sound and rich and unique tonal beauty in Ke. The sound of the Chyabrung itself is the message of happiness, events and joy.

Lastly, the topic is also showcased, caring for the ancient heritage of the community, indigenous knowledge as well as preserving, protecting and promoting the Limbu culture.

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