

Music as a constructor of Identity: A study of Koch-Rajbanshi's Kushan Gan

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Introduction

The objective of this research intends to affirm the use of music as a form of expression, used by many cultures all over the planet. It's needed to understand the symbolism used by the Koch-Rajbanshi's which have been transmitting for centuries the Ramayana in a musical and theatrical way. Therefore, it is my purpose to prove that music is a cultural form of expression which not only values the quality of the performance but also needs to be concomitant of an empowered meaning. (Sardo, 2011) This way I will unveil the meaning of the ceremonial Kushan Gan explaining the non-musical aspects of it. To accomplish this, it is suitable to explain what Ramayana is or wouldn't it be the determinative reason of why these people perform the Kushan Gan. After approaching Ramayana, the aim is to describe what you might listen and see while during a Kushan Gan performance. This portrays the instruments, the clothes, the dance, number of people and gender, which roll they have, how it is structured and the length of the presentation.

In an Ethnomusicological way, it is utterly important to define what cultural phenomena influenced such structured type of music, which means that Ethnomusicology needs a meticulous approach beyond the musical aspects on its own terms. As proposed by William Bright, there are two structured approaches that can be considered: an *endo-semantic* vision focused on sound elements such as pitch, or melodic structures and timbre, and an *exo-semantic* vision which directs its attention to non-audible aspects that made a point in

the nature of music as an expression. (Kazadi, 2008)

Supported by other Ethnomusicologists studies, my perspective of what music stands for becomes stronger and plausible. That is why this research needed to be done. A special need to live and experience another culture is in fact the living proof that music is beyond business, and that it is completely misunderstood among masses. It may be suitable to compare this experience to a need of keeping Ramayana alive. This actually means that keeping a belief alive for centuries defines identity. What can also be alluded is that music is way stronger and useful than we thought. It is chemistry first of all, and interacts with our brain in a certain way that we might not be aware of. For instance, Plato's own vision of a well-educated citizen passes by learning *literature, music* and *arts* as well, turning this into a great power that in fact influences one's character. Assuming that music has an ethical and aesthetic importance, its main function would be this way, pedagogical, implying in our own moral and ethical construction, furthermore in the formation of a nation. (Fonterrada, 2008, p. 27)

I certainly cannot define the character of Koch-Rajbanshi's, but I can affirm that music was and still is in fact a form of keeping their own beliefs alive. I can certainly prove that in fact music is an important expression of their lives while holders of mythological aspects, which defines who they are and what is the cultural background in which they forged identity.

Koch-Rajbanshi's anthropological origins

Researchers usually say that this community is an intercultural mixture between Austral-Asiatics, Dravidians, Mongols and Aryans. You might find in this people many similarities with the Mongols, which are characterized to be

short height, fair complexioned and flattened nose. A little bit further into the Koch-Rajbanshi's lands, we might find that they also can be tall and have sharp nose, which reminds us the north or midland Indians, who trace their origins in Aryan culture. At the same time, some of them are as dark as Dravidians. This means that this people are an ancient group of the Indian population, who had a complex aggregation of foreign cultures over the ages.

For centuries, the Aryan community tried to headway into to the eastern part of India, which they were resisted by the people of *Pundra* (eastern Bihar, Southern part of North Bengal and western part of Bangladesh), *Banga* (southern part of Bangladesh and south Bengal) and *Kamrup* (north Bengal and western part of Assam). Despite all efforts, these aboriginal people had surrendered to the Aryan people.



Fig. 1 – Assam Map

There are many different opinions about the origins of the Koch-Rajbanshi's people, but regarding the Mongols, scholars believe that settlers like the *Kirats* and *Chinas* after the interlace with the Aryans, might originated the Koch-Rajabanshis. The elder social bond between Koch-Rajbanshis and

Kalitas still endures, as well as marital relationship.

As many communities in India that joined the Aryan culture, also the Rajbanshis had been influenced by it. Ancestors of the Rajbanshi community, who were settlers in the hilly terrains of north Bengal, Assam and other adjoining areas, later took Hinduism as a religious belonging. This might be highly related to the practice of Kushan Gan, which tells us the Ramayana.

Different theories on the origins of the community are told. Some say that back in the pre-Vedic period, the people of *Pundravardhan* were the great rulers of this western part of the country, who were regarded as *Kshatriyas* by the invaders *Aryans*. It is believed that they were guarding the northeast frontier of the country and resisted the "Aryanized" people for centuries. The *Kshatriyas* were a mixture between *Mongols*, who invaded this region much earlier, and the *Dravidians*, that after invading mainland, have penetrated into the eastern part of India. (Ray, p. 8-10; 2007)

Regarding the use of Koch or Rajbanshi name to address the community, there are common misunderstandings about its usage. A researcher – Anuj Choudhury – reported to me while on field work, that there is a lot of confusion while using the term. The Koches of India are mainly inhabitants of West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya and Bihar, which in west Bengal and in Bihar the community is always known as 'Rajbongshi', in Assam as 'Rajbongshi', 'Koch' and 'Koch-Rajbongshi'. Even with different forms of address, according to the scholar's studies, the origin of the community is one: the Kochs, which are said to be immigrants from the Tibetan region.

So, one of the main reasons that conducts our thoughts to assimilate the Kochs with Rajbanshis, are the contact that the Kochs had with Caste Hindu Society. Because the Bengali Bhadralkosof the

upper caste considered the Kochs to be part of the lower caste, they stand for a position in society denying its place. Also, they belong to a royal princely lineage, which they could not accept to be placed lowest in the Hindu hierarchical social order. A process of “Sanskritization” began among the Kochs to change the situation. In a publication in the *Center of Koch-Rajbongshi Studies and Development*, Choudhury says that the process of “sanskritization” reached its peak under the *Kshatriya Movement* led by PanchananBarma (1866-1935) in Bengal. At this time they were trying to prove a relation between the Rajbanshis and the royal lineage of the Kshatriyas, and that the genetics had nothing to do with the Sudras, as regarded by the Bengali Bhadralks. The movement involved a ceremonial Kshatriya process, and Brahmin rituals were performed to convert thousands of Rajbanshis to ‘Kshatriya Rajbanshi’ in the villages of North Bengal. However, the term Koch in upper Assam and in Meghalaya is still in usage. The surname Rajbongshi is also found in those areas, but both are not understood as different, which are used to indicate people from the same community. Recently, in 2011 The Government of Assam in a letter to NCBC confirmed that the term ‘Koch-Rajbanshi’ must be used to address the community. Therefore, it is now a constitutionally recognized term. (Choudhury; 2013)

Social aspects of the Kushan Gan

The Kushan Gan is characterized to be a folk theater form of art, that represents the ancient Ramayana: an epic poem regarded as one of the great works of Indian literature dated approximately from 500BC to 100AD (Winternitz, 1996, Goldman 1984; Brockington, 1984, 2000); which is transmitted as a dramatic presentation involving singing, dancing, acting, music and recitation of the dialogue written in the manuscript. This way, the main intention of

a Kushan Gan performance is to transmit knowledge, norms and morals as described in the Ramayana. This particular type of art can be found mostly in the Western part of Assam, which some scholars define Goalpara district as the home of Kushan Gan. It is also performed beyond the Western territory of Assam, taking its performances in North-Bengal, including Coochbehar and Jalpaiguri. In opposite to other regions, it seems to be regularly practiced in this particular area. Other areas of importance that continuously perform Kushan Gan are Purnia of Bihar, Rangapur and Mymensingh of Bangladesh, Doars regions of Bhutan, Jhapa regions of Nepal, and the western part of the state of Meghalaya.

Even though Kushan Gan is in fact performed in all these areas, it might be difficult to have satisfying results concerning the formation of the art. Being a foreigner, the information acquired doesn’t get quite clear, for the Indian culture has too many languages. Even supported with the help of a translator you might find difficulties: the translator that tries to explain what a *Kushanee* (Guru that teaches the Kushan Gan) is trying to define might have a lack of understanding while dealing with another diversification of the Indian languages. The Koch-Rajbanshi people have their own language, but the lexical might change from Bongaigaon to Dhubri regions of Assam for example. To have a clear idea of dialect difficulties dealt with, even for local people of India that attends to these performances, concerning the narration that *Geedal* gives in Bengali – that is regarded as the official language of both Bangladesh and North East Indian state of West Bengal -, the *Dowari* also narrates Kushan Gan contents in a local dialect of Rangpuri or Rajbanshi. (Courtney; 2015)

The Kushan Gan performances don’t happen very often during the year, but in Goalpara district they are really appreciated, and people from this region

have a sense of belonging and identity with the religious practice. In who might be the next *Geedal* – Mr. Ashok Chakrabarty – own words, people really identify themselves with it:

“Actually Kushan Gan is very famous in Goalpara district so, it comes from the land. It is in the heart of Goalpara’s district people. Whenever the Kushan Gan happens, people from this area (Dhubri) also go there. They really like it.”

People who practice Kushan Gan have a strong proximity with the Hindu religion, where Ramayana comes from, and they’re intuit is to spread its word while giving people knowledge of Lord Rama’s actions. Mr. Ashok Chakrabarty says:

“Kushan Gan has the purpose to convert people into this religious form, that tells the Ramayana, which came from the Hindus. Regarding our culture, we want to spread the news of Ramayana... of what Lord Rama have done once his father sent him to exile.”

The performance that is here being analyzed had its place on *Geedal*Bhudan Chandra Roy’s own house, a settlement situated in Dhubri district – located 290 km away from the state capital Guwahati. The place is surrounded by rice field plantations and structures made out of Bamboo, the strongest, practical material most used in Assam. There were four houses forming a square equipped with a patio that fitted perfectly for the performance’s needs. This Kushan Gan presentation didn’t happen in a regular way involving a festivity occasion, but it happened indeed by request, through the help of *Kamatapur Student’s Organization* representative Dr. UttamKummar Ray, who knows *Geedal*Bhudan.



Fig. 2 – Kamatapur Student’s Organisation

This, and to understand in which situations musical events happens, took just two hours of conversation to settle an agreement and in the next day the musicians were ready to travel heading Dhubri, to *Geedal*Bhudan’s house. There is a lack of information for performance’s dates, and with previous request by the *Geedal*, six dancers composed by women, six instrument players composed by men and the *Daaree* came from other regions near Dhubri by public transportation to perform. In the interview, Mr. Ashok says:

“They have come from different places. In Dhubri it is just not possible to gather all the people involved.”

The patio was compound of four banana trunks, decorated with bamboo leaves and a plastic cover fixed on top of it, forming a tent that protected the patio from the sunlight. After the summarized presentation, that lasted approximately half

an hour, a homemade lunch was served for everyone.

Kushan Gan performers don't make a living out of it; they have other occupations that provide them monetary subsistence. Questioning one of the two *Khol* players about the audience all over the Indian Territory, I got to know that from this particular Kushan Gan group, just recently they got in contact with *Eastern Zonal Cultural Center of Kolkata*, in order to advertise their work. Possibly it can result in having some profit for group needs in general. The *Eastern Zonal Cultural Center of Kolkata* promotes their work and from then on, perhaps other party districts hire them for performances, paying.

Mr. Ashok - "*The Eastern Zonal Cultural Center of Kolkata has a scheme containing information about the guru's (regarding Kushan), so they are trying to preserve and even promote it to transnational borders.*", "*...financial support is not possible, they are just trying to preserve by advertising it.*"



Fig. 3 – Eastern Zonal Cultural Center of Kolkata advertiser

The literature observed in Kushan Gan

The theater form here observed does not depend on any music sheet or any kind of written script, although it is supported by some narrative segments taken from the Ramayana. Regarding dissemination purposes, the fact that this is a needy theatrical form of a dossier, with a registry of musical nomenclature, lyrics, and dance movements, this worsens its spreading and availability to the masses. This, is a problem regarding the preservation of this performing art.

Regarding it as essentially religious, Kushan Gan tells us the story of Rama's sons Kush and Laba. Even though they are told in different ways, they have one equal fact in common that is the creation of Kush:

It is told that once upon a time, Sheeta's son Laba was missing and off course his mother was concerned, which didn't know how to tell her husband Rama. She told a saint called Valmiki about her problem and asked him for help in order to solve this situation. Valmiki told her to "bring some straw" (as Kush means "hay" or "straw", and "aan" means "bring"). Once she brought the straw to Valmiki, he transformed it into the missing child Laba, blessing him with life. It appears that after some time, Laba returned and even with the will of Valmiki in killing Kush, Sita said no. For that time on, Sita had two sons.

Another version by the own words of the geedalBhudan Chandra Roy, while doing my research:

Sita went to the river to wash her clothes leaving Laba in the hands of Valmiki to take care of him. But Valmiki initiated his mediation, relying that the child wouldn't disappear. When he

suddenly realized that Laba was missing, fearing Sita's punishment he created another child equal to Laba out of "kush", which is said to be a holy type of grass. When Sita returned to meet Valmiki, Laba was with her in the first place. Valmiki wanted to undone his creation but Sita didn't allow it.

The Ramayana is an epic assigned to the poet Valmiki. It is compound of 24,000 verses in 7 corners telling us the story of a prince – Rama of Ayodhya – involving his wife Sita that was abducted by the demon Ravana, king of Lanka. The verses are written in a specific measure of 32 syllables. In its actual shape, the Ramayana dates approximately from 500 BC to 100 AC. However, it is difficult to determine with accurate precision the exact date of the publishing. Holding the teachings of the elder wise Hindus, it presents them in an allegoric, philosophical and devotional way. The main characters of this epic – Rama, Sita, Lakshmana, Bharata, Hanuman and Ravana -, are all fundamental to the consciousness of the Indian culture.

We are discussing an epic that had a strong impact on the Indian subcontinent, as well as in the south-eastern Asia, with major influence in arts and other subjects among the cultures involved, like literature, architecture and performance. Off course, this meant to happen due to a progressive conquer in the VIII century led by the Indians, through the south-eastern Asia, where great empires like the *Khmers* had established. Traveling through the Asian part of the planet, you can see a major influence in Thailand, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia and others. (Goldman; 1999)

In Assam, the first translation of the Ramayana to Assamese, dates from the 15th century. It was Madhav Kandali who first translated it. Kirttibasa, a poet belonging from Phulia of Bengal, translated the Ramayana into Bengali language in the 15th

century also. He accomplished all the 7 parts of it: *Bala Kanda*, *Ayodhya Kanda*, *Aranya Kanda*, *Kishkindya Kanda*, *Sundara Kanda*, *Yuddha Kanda* and *Uttara Kanda*. According to other researchers, 'KirttibasaRamayan' is found to be the principle source and model of the Kushan Gan. After, from the 16th to the 18th century, the Koch kings were determined to spread the Ramayana in Assamese language, giving royal patronage to scholars of Assam to translate it.

According to some Geedals, *KirttibasaRamayan* has been used as a source of text in Kushan Gan for a long time now, but the presentation style of those narratives are unique. The Geedals themselves, often compose some parts, twisting the narratives to make something suitable for the dramatic performance. The reason behind this adoption of *KirttibasaRamayan* perhaps emerged with the progressive acceptance of Bengali language and culture during the 16th century. The most popular narratives are considered to be *Laxmanara Saktiselan* and *Harischandrar Daan*, which are still performed in Kushan Gan. (Mohanty; 2012)

Kushan Gan: Music, Dance and Theater combined

Belonging to Koch-Rajbanshi community, the theatrical form combined with music, dance and representation, has an oral process of disclosure, regarding the word of Ramayana. The process of teaching and learning has a particular designation in Koch-Rajbanshi's language: "Guru-Sisya Parampara", which means "preceptor-disciple tradition". (Mohanty; 2012)

What does it take to be the next Geedal? Any musician involved that demonstrates interest in succeed as so, has the right to do it. The next wise step to take is indeed devotion to the present Geedal. The next learning Kushanee (learner) must

know everything about the contents of Kushan Gan and, therefore, he needs to learn and play every musical instrument as well as master the melodies, rhythms, and the structure of it. To be the best Geedal, it is expected from the student that he manages to develop dancing skills in order to teach the dancers, commonly formed by women. If there is any doubt about the purpose of Kushan Gan, he instinctively must provide the information necessary, so the musicians feel and know the meaning of what they're doing. The historical aspects must be clear to everyone, for this to happen as a 'pass the word' way of disclosure. What is said during the presentation takes its place in the Hindu literature, leading no mistake about this, the Ramayana must be part of the student's daily life.

Concerning aesthetics, the compositions must have a few adjustments so the literature involved fits and sounds clear. Arranging a composition is often a complex need of all world's music, and it is expected from the Geedal that these adjustments come in most suitable way so the final product of the performance satisfies the ear and the eye. Without any pentagram registry of the musical form, the process of arrangement come with a lit cut here and there, and a few trials till it fits the intention of the composer. By switching the sentences order of the narrative, the performance turns into something more effective.

The guidelines for the structure of Kushan Gan occurs with the support of a script. If the Geedal wants a certain narrative to be performed, it is on its own responsibility to prepare it with the disposition of the songs, dialogues, dramatic sequences, plot design and narrative style. (Mohanty; 2012)

Drawing our attention to music contents of the Kushan Gan, while watching a performance, we will always find that the Geedal carries a one-stringed instrument called *Bena*. Since it has only

one string, the tonal aspects of the music are mainly dictated by its pitch. Found in North East India and Bangladesh, this instrument is widely used for folk songs and fits perfectly with Manipuri dance styles also. Belonging to a vast culture of bowed instruments that delimit the north India, it is similar to others that can be seen in Maharashtra or Rajasthan, like the *Revanhasta*. In Manipur, it once had a significant importance in the royal courts and was considered part of the 'high culture' of the region, but today is usually associated with folk music and the traditional Manipuri dance. Occasionally, it is used in weddings.



Fig. 4 – GeedalBhuban Chandra Roy Kushan group

The harmonization is supported by the *Harmonium*, a Western hand-pumped organ developed by French people. Even though it has its origins in the Western territory, the Indians took its developments further in unique ways, such as the addition of a scale-changing mechanism. Sited on the floor and behind the instrument, the musician carries the job of harmonizing the melodically based Indian type of music. Now, regarding a regular organ, the basis

for chord changes can be done with both hands, but in this case, since the Indian music is melodically based, the performer pumps air into the organ with a specific device, and with the other hand he plays the chords, and sometimes the other instruments voice melodic lines as well. So, the harmonic basis for our Kushan Gan are determined by the Harmonium, since it holds a strong potential of accompaniment.

The *Bansuri*: a flute made out of the great Indian's natural resource, bamboo; perhaps it is one of the most charming sounds of India's colorful culture. *Transverse* or *fipple*, the Koch-Rajbanshis also use it for the Kushan Gan devotional music. Although, characterized with a specific length of bamboo wood with seven holes, the *transverse* is the preferred one. It seems that the nipple flute limits the skills of the player, because the possibility of *embouchure* is missing.

Its use is related to cultural and religious purposes among Hindus. It is associated with Lord Krishna, which reveals an agreement between music and the identity of Koch-Rajbanshis. They don't see the flute only as a musical instrument, but also as a form of communication with the gods. Also a singer, the *Bansuri* player reproduces the voice melodic lines in its flute as well, this way, the pitch gains strength and becomes clearer. We can notice some signs of improvisation, wouldn't it be one of the most attractive things in India's music. When we hear the flute, we might realize that a game of 'question and answer' is played between voice melodic lines, and the *Bansuri*.

The number of artists required for the performance will depend on the narrative needs. Geedals normally say that they need from 15 to 25 people to perform, but during the presentation, and depending on the narrative, the number of performers on stage may increase or decrease.

A Kushan Gan group is often known by the Geedal's own name, which this actually reveals that changes will

happen on the same group for centuries, if the group still stands. Considering that anyone from the group can manifest his intention of being the next Geedal, this reveals group survival. Being responsible for such a large group of people is not an easy task. So, the Geedal needs to hold and develop through years all the skills involved in the theater form that we observe. In the moment of his decision to be the leader, he already knows what kind of hard work he will face during *gurusisyaparampara*. While then, he will develop skills of a complete musician; he will be a choreographer, script writer, a dancer, story teller, a commentator and most important, a true expert of Ramayana.

During my field work, I got to know that GeedalBhuban Chandra Roy, of this particular group, started his life in Kushan Gan as a *Chukri*. In the old days of Kushan Gan, Chukris were men dressed in women's clothes, meant to be dancers. In those days, women were not allowed to participate. Nowadays, women are the ones who dance. This all to say that, Bhuban started as a dancer, and gradually he learned about the other instruments involved. He learned what it takes to be a *Dowari*, because he became one also. After all this learning process, he took the last steps to become a *Geedal*.

Being a *Dowari* is also an important part of a Kushan group. His main function is to support all the contents of the theatrical form, under Geedal's instructions. He is characterized to be a person who knows more languages apart from the Rajbanshi language, in order to get the public's attention. He also demonstrates great skills in dancing, singing, acting, playing musical instruments and most of all, he is a person that gives excitement and willpower to the group. He introduces social elements so this way he interacts with the public, and catches them attention. He is humorous, satiric, and funny while narrating with the Geedal. He is a truly entertainer. In his studies on Kushan Gan,

Dr. Mohanty came to understand that one of the main reasons behind the popularity of Indian folk theater is the interplay between two different worlds – the divine world and the world. The Dowari has the capacity of mixing jokes and ironies, mediating between both worlds. (Mohanty; 2012)

Beside *Bena*, Kushan has another bowed instrument called *Saringda*. It is found in Northern India, Pakistan and Nepal. Bow instrument with four strings, which sometimes can have more that reverberate when the top strings are bowed or struck; a single carved piece of wood with two holes meant to project the strings sound, which one of the holes is covered with animal skin. That same hole is located in the lower part of the instrument, and upon it stays the bridge. The size is variable, which one or two feet is normal. Built with a fingerboard with no frets, it sounds like a Violin, which kind of reminds *country* style violins used in the United States. The bow, known as *Gaz* is also variable; it's built on wood and strung with horsehair. Occasionally, it has a more complicated construction based upon a wooden rod with a wooden frog supporting the horsehair.

The beats of Kushan Gan are supported by the *Khol*. This is a typical folk drum of northeast India. Its body is made out of clay, holding a very small head on top that produces a high pitch sound, pretty similar to *Tabla*, and a larger one on bottom that project the bass sound of Kushan Gan. Without any low pitch instrument, *Khol* is very important in order to give Kushan Gan a lowered sound, gifting it with a better equalization. It is known that an adaptation of fiberglass version of the *Khol* has become popular in the west. This is also a very typical instrument in Bengal and in Bangladesh. Supporting the rhythmic section, a very small instrument is also used, and it is called *Manjira*. It is called *Manjira, Tala* or *Mondira*. It is basically a set of two small cymbals with a very acute sound, which makes it a very high pitched

instrument. *Manjira* can be seen in all kind of Indian celebrations. It is used for religious purposes in temples, marriages, etc. It's made out of brass material.

The *Chukris* are a group of female dancers under the rhythm of Kushan Gan. Apart from dancing, they are an important part of the theatrical form in which they sing and act. Normally they are dressed in green clothes similar to a dress, the lips are painted in red and they have *Tilak*. You can see that they have earrings and necklaces, making them the most beautiful artists of this performance. The other musicians wear white *curta* and pants, with the typical green scarf of Assam.

In this performance, I could observe that the dancers have an accurate sense of rhythm. The performance had started without the participation of the dancers, and when suddenly they reduced the intensity and tempo of the music, the dancers slowly entered in scene. They were quite accurate while entering, moving around the musicians that were sited on the floor in a carpet. Those movements were basically circular, and they put a lot of expression in the hands. When a strong beat comes, they demarcate it with a slight turn in the hands. If two strong beats are impacted, they stretch the arms two times. It works really well with the music. They are completely in tune with all the music elements. This really helps the audience to feel the intensity of Kushan Gan.

While then, this is also the time that the Dowari joins the presentation with great enthusiasm.

We can realize that the *Chukris* and the Dowari use expressive gestures of what the *Geedal* and the Dowari himself are saying. For instance, sometimes they pretend to hold a *Bena*, while singing and dancing. Even not knowing *Rajbanshi* language, the expression put into it draws our attention, and we can easily know when tension or relief arrives. The Dowari is so given to acting that you quickly realize if he is happy, concerned or angry about

something. Besides, Chukris make a good job while intervening.



Fig. 5 – Complete scene of Kushan Gan performance

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