

THE USE OF KAREN BRONZE DRUMS IN THE ROYAL COURTS AND BUDDHIST TEMPLES OF BURMA AND THAILAND: A CONTINUING MON TRADITION?

Richard M. Cooler

The use and manufacture of bronze drums is the oldest continuous art tradition in Southeast Asia. Carbon-14 analyses have established that bronze drums were used before the sixth century B.C. in North Vietnam, where in recent years several archeological excavations have unearthed many new examples.¹ The advanced technique and design of these early drums indicate that they are the product of a prior development, and therefore the use of bronze drums probably began at an earlier date.

It was not fully realized until after Franz Heger completed a general survey of the drums in 1902 that there are four distinctly different types.² His classification of the drums into four types, based on changes in form and decoration, has retained its validity even in light of later research. The earliest of the four types is known as Heger Type I and is characterized by having the general form of a mushroom, which is the form found at Dong Son, North Vietnam. According to Heger, Type I gave rise directly to three additional types, but only one of these will concern us here: Heger Type III, the Karen-type drum which is characterized by a less-bulbous cylinder, a protruding lip on the tympanum, and three-dimensional frogs at four equidistant locations around the periphery of the tympanum.³

The majority of bronze drums known today were discovered during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when they were unearthed during uncontrolled excavations or were found among culturally isolated groups. Over the years sporadic discoveries have been made in Burma, Thailand, Laos, Malaysia, Cambodia, and Indonesia.⁴ At present, bronze drums have been found in all the countries of Southeast Asia except the Philippines. It has been proposed that the drums found scattered throughout the island world of Indonesia are evidence of an ancient maritime trade between North Vietnam and Indonesia.⁵ The wide geographical as well as cultural distribution of the drums indicates that the peoples of

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Southeast Asia have had an extraordinary fascination with these objects and that the drums frequently passed from one ethnic group to another. The fascination which the Karen people have shown for the bronze drums is typical of the enthusiasm these objects have engendered among vastly different ethnic groups. The use of bronze drums among the progenitors of the Karen probably began in the last quarter of the first millennium A.D., and as Karen identity developed, the ornamentation on newly cast drums was gradually changed to express their particular beliefs.⁶

Based upon the general distribution pattern of the drums among different ethnic groups, scattered archeological excavations, and Chinese dynastic accounts, the use of bronze drums appears to have spread primarily in two directions from North Vietnam: southward along the coast into Indonesia and northward into the province of Yunnan, China.⁷ From Yunnan, the use of bronze drums seems to have spread slowly in two further directions, eastward into northern China and southward into Burma. The drums were apparently taken into Burma by the progenitors of the Karen, where they continued to be cast and used until 1924 when two attempts to cast drums failed.

Little is known about the ancestors of the Karen because the point in time when the Karen became a separate, identifiable, ethnic group has not been established. Chinese dynastic histories do not provide verifiable information towards establishing this date, because it is not known if the references in these accounts refer to the ancestors of the Karen or to the ancestors of other hill-tribe groups.⁸

Karen Drums at Burmese Courts

The earliest record of bronze drums in Burma is found in two inscriptions, believed to have been written slightly before A.D. 1056, which describe King Manuha's reception by his subjects while he was still ruler of the Mon kingdom of Thaton. King Manuha's "people went into his presence and repeatedly saluted him . . . to the sound of drums, frog-drums and acclamations. . . ." ⁹ Thus the Mons employed Karen bronze drums to acknowledge the presence of their king. The Mons inhabited the southern plains of both Burma and Thailand prior to the southward migration of the Burmese and Thai. Since these areas are contiguous to the mountainous regions inhabited by the Karen, the bronze drums probably arrived at the Mon court as trade

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goods, gifts, or tribute.

In A.D. 1056, Thaton was sacked by the first great Burmese monarch, King Anoratha, who forced King Manuha and many of his Mon subjects to move to the new Burmese capital at Pagan, located over three hundred miles to the north in central Burma. These Mon captives and their descendants played a major role in the cultural and religious life of Pagan for over a hundred years.

An inscription found at Pagan, written slightly before A.D. 1093, records that the second great Burmese monarch, King Kyanzittha, sent a mission to India to repair the revered Bodhgaya temple, and as a gift for the temple he sent Karen frog drums.

Kyanzittha 'got together all sorts of precious things, and sent a ship with the intent to (re)build the Holy Śrī Bajrās [Bodhgaya]: to buy [land?], dig a reservoir, make irrigated ricefields, make dams, cause candles and lamps to be lit which should never be quenched; and give drums, *frog-drums*, stringed and percussion instruments, and singing and dancing better than ever before...'¹⁰

This inscription is the earliest indication that Karen bronze drums had become appropriate objects for a lowland monarch to give to a Buddhist temple.

In A.D. 1102, upon the completion of his new palace, King Kyanzittha had Karen drums sounded as part of the dedication ceremony in which the Mons were accorded a place of honor.¹¹ It is clear from this account and other more recent descriptions that the instruments were used to punctuate rather than accompany the ceremonial.

A typical instance is to be seen in the Kyangitthas [*sic*] Palace Inscription where, after the Brahmins had made offerings of *paritta* water, "then they sounded all the drum-chimes, flutes, trumpets and mouth-organs, made the *lāthar* and the *mināsār* rumble, beat the drum and blew the *kakā*; and all the troops raised a shout."¹²

In the inscriptions discussed above, a compound word is used to indicate "frog drum." The Mon word for drum, *pham*, appears in conjunction with the Karen word for frog drum, *k/o*.¹³

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Karen drums are mentioned in the eleventh century only when the inscriptions were written in Mon; they are never mentioned in later inscriptions which were written in Burmese. This change parallels the waning of Mon influence at Pagan and the flowering of Burmese culture. By the nineteenth century, the custom of using Karen drums at the Burmese court appears to have ceased. When King Shwebo-Min was given a Karen drum, he did not use it at court but instead gave it to a Buddhist temple.

During the reign of Shwebo-Min [Tharrawady Min, 1837-46] the Karen Chief named Pabbata Devaraja [lit. 'Lord of the Mountain'] came from Kye-Pho-Gyi [in Kayah State] with presents for the King which included a daughter as well as a frog drum. A small piece was missing from the rim of the drum. An inquiry was made concerning the missing piece and the answer received was that according to ancient custom, upon the death of a Karen Chief, his primary wives, elephants, horses, weapons and utensils were buried with him. During the time of Hamsawati, The Great King, Lord of Many White Elephants [Bayinnaung, 1551-81], this custom was forbidden by the king and the custom died. However, as a token of this custom bits of hair, the finger and toenail clippings of the primary wives, the tips of the ears from elephants and horses, along with pieces of utensils were buried with the chief. Therefore, a small piece was broken from this drum to be interred in a tomb. As a result, the King, Shwebo-Min, donated this frog drum to the Shwezigon pagoda at Pagan. During the construction of the Pagan Museum [1904] this frog drum was moved from the Shwezigon to the new museum.¹⁴

The king's act of giving the drum to the pagoda was motivated by the imperfection of the drum and the Burmese belief that things broken and things associated with the dead are inauspicious and, consequently, should be given to a monastery. Such objects are not used in state or religious ceremonies.

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Karen Drums in Thailand

The geographical area of Thailand was slowly occupied by the ancestors of the modern Thais as they infiltrated southward. This process occurred over a long period of time and by the thirteenth century the Thais were able to assert their independence and establish their capital in central Thailand at Sukhothai. As the Thais moved southward, they encountered the Mons and the Khmers who had been greatly influenced by Indian culture and had adopted many Indian musical instruments for their own use. The Thais added these Mon-Khmer instruments to their ensemble and by the Sukhothai Period they had created a variety of musical instruments derived from these earlier types.¹⁵

The first written record of bronze drums in Thailand is found in the *Three Worlds According to King Ruang* (*Tray Phum Phrá Rûang*), which was completed around A.D. 1345 by Phya Lithai (Lötai), then heir apparent to the throne of the Thai kingdom of Sukhothai-Srisatchanalai.¹⁶ This lengthy discourse on Buddhist cosmology describes the thirty-one realms which comprise the three worlds: *kāma bhūmi*, the world of desire; *rūpa bhūmi*, the world with only a remnant of material qualities; and *arūpa bhūmi*, the world without material qualities. Bronze drums are mentioned here as one of the instruments played by the idealized inhabitants of the nearly perfect continent of *uttarakuru*, which is one division of the realm of men within *kāma bhūmi*.¹⁷

There are various fragrant flowers which they put behind their ears, and they go strolling around and enjoying themselves at their leisure. Some hop, some dance, some do dramatic dances and individual dances, and some make loud music with instruments, some by plucking, some by the use of a bow, some by striking and some by blowing. Some sing in choruses accompanied by gongs [*khōṁ*], drums [*kḥṁ*], trumpets [*trē*], conch shells [*trē sḥā*], bells [*rākhaṅ*], and metal drums [*máhḥoráthýk*]; and they do so loudly and festively.¹⁸

The above reference to bronze drums is unusual because the drums do not appear within the context of court ritual or Buddhist worship as they do in all earlier and later references. Although the

playing of amelodic musical instruments for state and religious ceremonies is described elsewhere in the *Three Worlds According to King Ruang*, Karen drums are not mentioned.¹⁹ This may be an indication that at this time the Thais had had sufficient contact with the Mons to know of their musical instruments, but not of the rituals in which they were played.

The Thai word for bronze drum used in this passage is *máhōrāthýk* (มโหระทึก), the derivation of which is unknown. The word might possibly be a contracted form of *máhāa* (มหา) 'great'; *hǎorādii* (หรรดี), an elegant and literary term for "southwest"; and *týk-týk* (ตึก) or *thýk-thák* (ทึกทัก), an onomatopoeic term for the sound of a beating heart.

According to Dhanit Yupho's chronology, the earliest group of musical instruments used by the Thai were given onomatopoeic names.²⁰ The use of *týk-týk* or *thýk-thák*, an onomatopoeic term for "heartbeat," would have been consistent with this early terminological practice. The remaining names of musical instruments listed in this passage are also onomatopoeic.

The Thais were aware of the origins of their musical instruments when assigning them names. The ethnic origin of borrowed instruments was most often indicated by placing the name of the ethnic group after the name of the instrument. The Thai terms for instruments borrowed from the Mon are exemplary: *khǎw mǎon* (ฆ้องมอญ), a vertical, gong circle; *tàphoon mǎon* (ตะโพนมอญ), a large wooden drum with leather tympanum; and *pìi mǎon* (ปี่มอญ), a large, wooden, reeded horn. A similar compound construction for Karen drums, such as *týk mǎon* or *týk kàrìan*, would have been unsuitable because the drums were used by both Mon and Karen. The term *hǎorādii* would have adequately described the region where they originated and where they were played by both the Mon and Karen. The areas occupied by the Mon and Karen would have been located to the Thais' southwest as they migrated to Sukhothai.

The word *máhāa* is Sanskrit and was used extensively as a bound prefix by lowland peoples exposed to Indian cultural influences. It occurs in the nomenclature of kings, buildings, and objects associated with royalty.

If the above derivation is correct, the drums referred to as *máhōrāthýk* would have been Karen drums (Heger Type III) and not the earlier Dong Son type (Heger Type I). For the purposes of this

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paper, *máhðoráthýk* will be used exclusively to refer to Karen bronze drums because it is most unlikely that during the Sukhothai and Ayuthaya periods *máhðoráthýk* referred to Dong Son drums, although the term is so used today. The limited number of Dong Son drums discovered in Thailand have been accidentally unearthed in recent time over a diverse geographical area and are not peculiar to the southwest. There is no evidence that Dong Son drums were ever cast in Thailand and it is surmised that they were buried well before the eleventh century A.D. The more numerous Karen type had evolved and been in use at the courts of Burma for more than 250 years before they are mentioned in the Thai religious treatise, *Three Worlds According to King Ruang*. In addition, the collections of bronze drums which have been inherited by the royal families of Thailand and Laos are comprised exclusively of Karen drums.²¹

In 1350 the Thai capital was reestablished further south at Ayuthaya and during the fourth reign bronze drums are again mentioned. The Thai Palatine law, written during the reign of King Borom Trilokanath (c. 1448–88), states that bronze drums were frequently played at court ceremonies where “in the ninth month of the year, Khun Srii (Sīikèet) played conch (*sǎŋ*), Phra Inthroo played a drum (*ʔínthá phayrii*), Phra Nonthiket played a large gong (*khóŋ chay*) and the head musician played a bronze drum (*hðoráthýk*).”²²

During this period, bronze drums also were played for Buddhist ceremonies. “At the celebration of the largest image of Buddha in a temple, they paid respects by playing a large gong (*khóŋ chay*) and the head musician played a bronze drum (*hðoráthýk*).”²³ The term used in these passages for frog drum is *hðoráthýk*, which omits the first syllable of the word used during the earlier Sukhothai Period, *máhðoráthýk*. This is an indication that *ma* was probably a modifier and not a part of the essential meaning of the word.

From the above passages it is evident that during the Ayuthaya Period the use of bronze drums in combination with other amelodic instruments to punctuate state and religious ceremonies was similar to their earlier use at the royal courts in Burma. This tradition was continued by the Chakri kings after the Thai capital was reestablished further south at its present location, Bangkok.

In 1944, Ulrich Gühler gathered information on the use of Karen bronze drums in Thailand and visited the Royal Palace in Bangkok where he discovered more than twenty–six Karen drums. Although most of these drums were used to furnish the private chambers, six

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were kept within the Royal Audience Hall where they were sounded together with trumpets from the moment the king entered the chamber until he was formally seated on the throne, a period of five to ten seconds. The drums were again repeatedly struck from the moment the king rose to leave the chamber until he disappeared from view. This sequence was not observed for informal audiences at which the king was not enthroned.²⁴

For state processions, Karen drums were carried on rods and struck at appropriate intervals. During the Tot Kathin Water Festival, four drums were placed on the king's barge and were struck when he first came into view and during the procession. The drums were located on the same barge as the person of the king and the number was decreased from four to two for less important processions.²⁵

When the king and queen were in residence in the Royal Palace or were lodged elsewhere in the kingdom, Karen drums were struck every three hours between 6 p.m. and 6 a.m. and at noon. The same drumbeat was used regardless of the hour because these flourishes were not intended to mark the passage of time but to ceremonially indicate the presence of the royal family.²⁶

According to Dhanit Yupho, King Rama IV endowed Wat Bovonivet with one Karen drum and Wat Phra Keo with two drums which were played by a special temple servant during the candle-lighting ceremony which preceded the morning and evening recitation of the Buddhist scriptures.²⁷ The drums at Wat Phra Keo also were played as part of the thrice-yearly ceremonies for the changing of the Buddha's robes.²⁸ The two drums at Wat Bechamabopit probably were placed there by King Rama V after the temple was constructed in 1899.²⁹ Thus, the practice of lowland monarchs giving Karen drums to Buddhist temples was continued by the Thai kings during the fifteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries.

In 1932, H. I. Marshall visited Wat Yai in Pitsanuloke and found four Karen drums within the temple building. Three of these drums had been mounted in the Thai fashion with the body of the drum suspended within a four-legged vertical frame.³⁰ In this manner the drum could be played or used as a table. When played by the Karen, the drums are suspended by a rope from one set of lugs and are allowed to hang freely just above the floor or ground. The musician sits on the ground and steadies the drum by inserting his big toe through the lugs on the lower side of the drum. The tympanum is

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beaten with a heavily padded stick, while the cylinder is struck with thin strips of bamboo. The Karen employ a variety of rhythmic patterns which correspond to specific rituals.³¹ The Thais play Karen drums with two heavily padded sticks, which are used to produce a variety of tones by striking the tympanum at the center, rapidly moving midway to the periphery, then back to the center.³² The Thais frequently lacquered or gilded the Karen drums in their possession, a practice foreign to the Karen.³³

From the sparse references cited above, it may be concluded that for over nine hundred years Karen bronze drums were intermittently played to acknowledge the presence of royal personages at the lowland courts of Thailand and Burma. Since the incidence of this practice corresponds to the intensity of Burmese and Thai contact with the Mon, the use of Karen drums at court may be a continuation of a Mon tradition within the courts of Burma and Thailand. A definitive statement concerning this relationship must await the availability of additional evidence.

Because of traditional lowland ethnocentricity, it is exceptional that the Mon, Burmese, and Thai had any interest in these hill-tribe musical instruments other than as exotic curiosities. It is therefore surprising that they were played for important state ceremonies at the royal courts. The early adoption of Karen drums by the Mon may have served to make these instruments more acceptable for use by the kings of Burma and Thailand. It is remarkable, indeed, that Karen drums, instruments intended for animist worship, were consistently deemed suitable as gifts from lowland monarchs to Buddhist temples where they were used to acknowledge the presence of the Buddha during major ceremonies. The broad significance of the consistency and continuity of these practices is that they are an instance of a reversal within the general flow of cultural influences from the lowlands to the hill tribes.

Notes

1. See Jeremy H. C. S. Davidson, "Recent Archaeological Activity in Viet-Nam," *Journal of the Hong Kong Archaeological Society* 6 (1975):80-99. The chronology of the earliest drums, frequently referred to as Dong Son drums, has created much debate and is reviewed by Nguyen Phuc Long in "Les Nouvelles Recherches Archaeologiques au Vietnam," *Arts Asiatiques* 21, numero special (1975):82-88. He proposed, based on carbon-14 analyses, a date of late sixth to third century B.C. for the Dong Son civilization (p. 85). For an extensive bibliography concerning the bronze drums found in North Vietnam, see Louis Bezacier, *Le Viet-Nam*, vol. 2 of *Asie du Sud-Est*, edited by G. Coedès and J. Boisselier, pt. 1 of *Manuel D'Archaeologie D'Extrême-Orient*, edited by Henri Hierche (Paris: A. et J. Picard, 1972), 303-6. See also Trinh Sinh and Nguyen Dinh Chien, "The Recently Discovered Bronze Drums in (Former) Ha Giang (Ha Tuyen)," *Archaeology* 1 (1980):57-65. Nguyen Huu Thu, "Essay on the Relationship Between the Pit of Cord-Drum and the Bronze Drum," *Archaeology* 3 (1980): 66-69.
2. Franz Heger, *Alte Metalltrommeln Aus Südostasien* (Leipzig: Kommissions-Verlag Von Karl W. Hiersemann, 1902).
3. Type II, the rarest of the four types, is used by the Muong of Vietnam. Type IV is essentially a Chinese type. See Bezacier, *Le Viet-Nam*, 185-92.
4. Richard Pearson, "Dong-S'ou and Its Origins," *Bulletin of the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica* 13 (1962):27-50.
5. *Ibid.*, 44-46.
6. Richard M. Cooler, "The Karen Bronze Drums of Burma: The Magic Pond," Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 1979. A detailed stylistic and cultural analysis of four hundred Karen drums. Forthcoming, E. J. Brill.
7. Pearson, "Dong S'ou," 40ff.
8. Herold J. Wiens, *Han Chinese Expansion in South China* (N.p.: Shoe String Press, 1967), 32-33, 67-70. Lo Hsiang-lin, "The Yüeh Bronze Drums, Their Manufacture and Use," in *Symposium on Historical, Archaeological, and Linguistic Studies on South China, Southeast Asia and the Hong Kong*

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- Region*, edited by F. S. Drake (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1967), 110–14. Wolfram Eberhard, *The Local Cultures of South and East China* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1968), 366–68.
9. Gordon H. Luce, *Old Burma, Early Pagan*, vol. 1 (Locust Valley, N.Y.: J. J. Augustin, 1969–70), 25. These last lines of both inscriptions are identical except that where one uses the word *trāp* ‘Lord!’, the other uses *pandit* ‘wise man!’.
 10. Luce, *Old Burma, Early Pagan*, 1:62. Italics added.
 11. *Ibid.*, 69, n. 149.
 12. D. C. Twitchett and A. H. Christie, “A Medieval Burmese Orchestra,” *Asia Major* 7, new ser. (December 1959): 179.
 13. Luce, *Old Burma, Early Pagan*, states “*pham* = drum; *pham klo*’, perhaps the bronze frog-drum, Karen, *klo*’. . .” (1:69, n. 149), although his translations of the term on pages 25 and 62 read “frog-drum.” Nai Pan Hla, Mon language specialist, Archaeological Survey of Burma, kindly reviewed the above passages in the original Mon script and concluded that the term cannot have a meaning other than “Karen frog drum.”
 14. U Tin, ed., *Myamma Min Okchokpon Sadan* [Treatise on the administration of Burmese kings], vol. 3 (Rangoon: Government Press, 1970), 114–15.
 15. Examples of such instruments are the *phin*, *săṇ*, *pìi chàṇăy*, *bandàw*, *kràcàppìi*, *càkêe*, and *thoon*. Dhanit Yupho, *Thai Musical Instruments* (Bangkok: Department of Fine Arts, 1971), 4.
 16. Frank E. Reynolds and Mani B. Reynolds, eds. and trans., *Three Worlds According to King Ruang: A Thai Buddhist Cosmology*, Berkeley Buddhist Studies Series, no. 4 (Berkeley: Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of California, 1982), 5. By kind permission of the editors-translators.
 17. *Ibid.*, 16, 49–60.
 18. *Ibid.*, 129–30. Also in Chin Youdi, *ʔàdʔit* [The past] (Bangkok: Rongphimneet, 1975), 148.
 19. Reynolds and Reynolds, eds., *Three Worlds*, 140, 143, 226–31, 236.
 20. Yupho, *Thai Musical Instruments*, 3, 5.

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21. Ulrich Gühler, "Studie über alte metall-trommeln," *Journal of the Thailand Research [Siam] Society* 35 (1944):65. Also, personal observation while conducting research in Laos, 1975.
22. Quoted in Chin Youdi, *Ṛad̐it*, 148. Also in Yupho, *Thai Musical Instruments*, 64.
23. Quoted in Chin Youdi, *Ṛad̐it*, 149.
24. Gühler, "Studie," 67.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Yupho, *Thai Musical Instruments*, 65.
28. Gühler, "Studie," 68.
29. Yupho, *Thai Musical Instruments*, 65–66.
30. Harry I. Marshall, "The Use of the Bronze Drum in Siam," *Journal of the Burma Research Society* 22, pt. 1 (1932): 21–22.
31. Harry I. Marshall, "Karen Bronze Drums," *Journal of the Burma Research Society* 19, pt. 1 (1929):9.
32. Marshall, "Use of the Bronze Drum," 21.
33. Gühler, "Studie," 66.

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