

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

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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.