

Bell-Metal Gongs of the Chin-Kuki-Mizo: Trade, Orality and Manufacture

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Abstract

Bell-metal gongs, which is native to a different region and introduced from outside, holds a significant place in the cultural heritage of the Chin-Kuki-Mizo community residing in the borderland between Indian and Myanmar. The presence of gongs is indispensable in various cultural practices of this community, ranging from celebratory feasts to funeral ceremonies. This article, thus, aims to explore the origin of these gongs and sheds light on the interplay between oral traditions and trade regarding the object. Through oral narratives, the article presents multiple accounts of the mythical origin or acquisition of gongs, alongside highlighting the intra-regional trade that takes place involving these musical instruments.

Keywords: bell-metal gongs, chin-kuki-mizo, orality, trade, manufacture.

Introduction

Bell-metal gongs are essentially produced by skilled artisan in different parts of Southeast Asia, including Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, and the Philippines. Each region has its unique gong-making techniques and styles, resulting in a diverse array of gongs with varying sizes, shapes, and designs. These

gongs hold immense cultural significance and are used in a wide range of contexts. They are often played in traditional music ensembles, such as *gamelan* orchestras in Indonesia and *piphat* ensembles in Thailand. Bell-metal gongs are also integral to religious and ceremonial practices, including weddings, funerals, harvest festivals, and temple rituals.¹

Gong, a term commonly used to refer to a musical instrument, originated from the Javanese language and eventually became universally recognized for this purpose. However, it is important to note that gongs themselves are not exclusive of Java. Archaeological evidence suggests that gongs have existed since ancient times, with the earliest written record of their use found in China in the sixth century. The popularity of gongs started to rise in the ninth century, and during this time, Java, Myanmar, China, Annam emerged as the main regions known for producing gongs.² The Chin-Kuki-Mizo³ named the gongs as per their dialect. The biggest single bossed gong is called *Dar/Da/Zampi*; a set of three unbossed gongs or gong chimes is called *Darbu/Dakbu*, a slightly smaller set of three gongs called *Nuaisuk Dak*, a set of three bossed gongs called *Daktal/Darmang*, and what is known as Kurtal is called *Darbenthek/Doldeng*.

Bell-metal gongs, which come in various forms such as bossed and unbossed gongs, are primarily musical instruments. While they are commonly found in South East Asia, evidence from explorations along trade routes indicates that gongs are also utilized in Africa and the Mediterranean region. Arsenio Nicholas, through his maritime archaeological discoveries of gongs, bells, and cymbals, sheds light on the presence of these musical instruments. In his article, he delves into the investigation of archaeological records of these instruments found in shipwrecks in maritime Asia. He suggests that the surge in maritime trade in Asia can be attributed to the closure of the overland silk route, which subsequently increased the importance of maritime routes for trade and cultural exchange. Moreover, he identified three types of gongs found in shipwrecks: 1) flat gongs

¹ For a comprehensive overview, see Terry E. Miller and Sean Williams (ed.): *The Garland Encyclopaedia of Music*, Volume 4: Southeast Asia. UK, Routledge, 1998.

² Andrew Knighton: 'The gong: a glorious history.' Available from: <http://www.polearmball.com/the-gong--its-lore--its-history.html>.

³ The term Chin-Kuki-Mizo is used to cover a large group of community settling along the Indo-Myanmar borderland. Though modern-day geo-political boundaries demarcated their habitations, this group of people shared common folklore and collective memories of origin and settlements. Terminologies such as "Lushai", "Kookie", "Cucis", "Shendus", "Lakher", "Chin", etc. were used to identify the people during colonial period but has tremendous repercussions in the aftermath of colonialism. As such, the usage of the term herein signifies neither political affiliation nor strict ethnic compartmentalization.

with narrow, straight rims; 2) bossed gongs with low bosses and narrow, turned-in rims; and 3) bossed gongs with low bosses and narrow straight rims.⁴ Besides what Nicholas has presented, gongs are categorized as shallow rim and deep rim, bossed and unbossed gongs.⁵

Trade

Bell-metal gongs of different shapes and sizes are also found in the hills. Bell-metal gongs of different shapes and sizes are also found in the hills. In 1835, R.G. Pemberton published a comprehensive book detailing his observations and experiences while serving under the Company. The book covers a wide range of topics related to the northeastern frontier of India. Pemberton noted that the people living in the mountains had limited contact with those in the plains. Instead, they had to trade the goods they produced with the nearest neighboring tribe. These neighboring tribes, in turn, engaged in trade with more developed regions to acquire products from the plains. Despite the limited scale of this trade, it was clear that bell-metal gongs and *kurtals* (cymbals), which were crafted by industrious people from Yunnan, were present in almost every hill village along the eastern frontier of India. This trade indicated the existence of border trade channels that needed attention and improvement in order to reach their full potential.⁶

As mentioned earlier, a variety of bell-metal gongs with diverse shapes and sizes are acquired from Myanmar through inter-village exchanges. These exchanges served as intermediaries for various purposes, including long-distance trade, ransoms, and marriages. Additionally, Carey and Tuck noted that metal bells, along with other trade goods, originating from India, were transported from Chittagong and Akyab through the Lushai Hills to the Chin Hills.⁷ Moreover, the practice of obtaining bell-metal gongs from Myanmar involved the exchange of goods and services between different villages. These exchanges served as vital channels for facilitating not only trade but also other significant social transactions such as settling ransoms and arranging marriages. Myanmar, with its rich cultural heritage, was a prominent source of bell-metal gongs, which came in various shapes and sizes, reflecting the diverse craftsmanship of the region. In the light of

⁴ Arsenio Nicholas: 'Gongs, Bells, and Cymbals: The archaeological record in Maritime Asia from the Ninth to the Seventeenth Centuries' in *Yearbook from Traditional Music*, 2009, 41, p. 62.

⁵ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica: 'Gongs: Musical Instrument. Available from: <https://www.britannica.com/art/gong-musical-instrument>.

⁶ R.B. Pemberton: *The Eastern Frontier of India*. New Delhi, Mittal Publication, 2015, p. 16.

⁷ B.S. Carey and H.N. Tuck: *The Chin Hills: A History of the People, our dealings with them, their Customs and Manners, and a Gazetteer of their Country*, Vol. 1. Aizawl, Tribal Research Institute, 2008.

this, Lehman's assertion does plays. According to him, the exact manner in which goods were distributed in the past upon reaching the hills remains uncertain. It is likely that they were partially transferred from village to village and partly exchanged by traveling merchants, similar to the present-day situation. Certain bulky items requiring costly transportation, such as large glazed beer pots, as well as valuable goods, were often obtained directly by inland villages by organizing their own expeditions to the plains. However, the movement of valuable ancestral items from one region to another also involved the exchange of goods through marriage connections and other networks, which significantly contributed to their circulation.⁸

Gongs hold great cultural significance in the Chin-Kuki-Mizo community, symbolizing both heirlooms and status. They are an integral part of their culture and heritage. The native people commonly use three types of gongs: large bossed gongs with shallow rims, three sets of gongs, and unbossed gongs. According to oral traditions, it is believed that gongs of various types have been traditionally obtained from Myanmar. Determining the exact age of the gong trade in the Indo-Myanmar borderland is challenging due to the lack of precise historical records. However, it is evident that the trade has continued to thrive even in contemporary times. The exchange and commerce of gongs have sustained over the years, reflecting their enduring cultural significance and the ongoing connection between the communities in the region.⁹

The continuity in trade can be supplemented with the life history of Tawnvela. Partly being an antiquarian and an entrepreneur, Tawnvela travelled to Myanmar to trade in amber necklaces and gongs in the 1970s. Starting his journey from Champhai in Mizoram, to Tahan in the Chin State, then on to Kalewa and Mandalay. Taking two to three days train from Mandalay to Kachin State, after which from a place called Mukong the journey took a week by foot to reach the amber mine. With gongs, he bought them from Mandalay with prices differing upon the size of the gongs; with measurement taken by *khap*, spanning the thumb and the little finger, eight *khap* costs ₹. 6000.¹⁰ By delving into Tawnvela's adventurous journey and his trading exploits, a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of trade and personal experiences is explored. The intricacies of his travel route and the unique characteristics of the goods he traded illustrate the diverse and vibrant nature of global commerce.

Orality

⁸ F.K. Lehman: *The Structure of the Chin Society: A Tribal People of Burma Adapted to a Non-Western Civilization*. Aizawl: Tribal Research Institute, 1980.

⁹ K.L. Berema, Personal Interview. 2022.

¹⁰ V. Tawnvela, Personal Interview. 2022.

Though ambiguous in nature, the antiquity of many of the heirloom gongs still preserved today cannot be ascertained. Coupling with myth, the collective memory of a certain heirloom is attributed to local knowledge. This is truly the case of the *Siallam Dar*, a set of three unbossed gong, an heirloom of Lalrengpuia Sailo. *Siallam Dar* was first owned by the Ngente¹¹ clan when they settled between the Run and Tiau rivers. From the Ngente, the Hualngo held possession. The ownership, then, passed on to the Ralte clan, and eventually to the Sailo. According to the story, two *Pasaltha*¹² individuals ventured into the forest for a hunting expedition. While seeking refuge for the night on a tree branch near a tree hole, one of them experienced a peculiar dream. In his dream, he saw a chameleon entering one of his nostrils and exiting through the other. Astonishingly, the chameleon then ascended the tree and rang a gong. This vivid dream woke him up, and he excitedly shared the details with his companion, speculating that a gong might actually be present inside the tree hole. Determined to investigate further, they planned to search for the gong the next morning. To their amazement, their dream transformed into reality when they discovered a collection of three gongs concealed within the tree hole. Eager to explore the potential of their newfound treasure, they carefully extracted the gongs and fashioned strings to hang them. Upon striking the gongs, a captivating melody resonated through the air, captivating even the gayals beneath their raised house. The Chin-Kuki-Mizo community's traditional architecture involved housing their livestock beneath the floor of their dwellings, and the rhythmic sound of the gongs prompted the gayals to break into a joyous dance. In light of this enchanting experience, the two men decided not to search for a specific name but instead embraced the name "Siallam Dar," meaning "the gongs that made the gayals dance."¹³

Among the Kuki-Chin, there existed bell-metal gong made out of silver locally known as *Zamkang*. This type of gong is said to be shiny and does not rust. Due to its scarcity, they attached great value to the extent that only the big chiefs who exercise suzerainty over a number of villages possessed the same; it is said that not more than four of this type was seen or known to have been found. The Guite, Haokip, Manlun and Sukte chiefs were the only ones to have possessed the gong.¹⁴ Upon enquiry of the one owned by the Guite chief, half of the gong burnt due to accidental fire in the 1940s that burnt down the house of the Guite chief whose seat

¹¹ It is imperative to note that the Chin-Kuki-Mizo social system is clan-based, with each clan having their own custom and tradition. For the most part, the movement of people and their settlement, chieftainship, and their belief system is based upon clan system.

¹² A *Pasaltha* is warrior or hero who accomplice achievements as a hunter and as a fighter, who is regarded by the village or social community as a whole.

¹³ Lalrengpuia Sailo. Personal Interview. 2023. See also, C. Lalaudinga: *Mizo Dar Hmingthangte*. Aizawl, Saia & Sons, 2002.

¹⁴ M. Jamzakham, Personal Interview. 2023

of authority lies in Hansip village in Manipur. The remaining half was hidden to this day by the chief's mother, in order to protect the gong.¹⁵

According to tradition, the most revered gong of all was the *Nuaisuk Dak*. This gong consists of three smaller unadorned gongs compared to the regular *Dakbu*. Despite its small size, it is believed that this gong can produce a sound that can be heard across seven mountains. What sets the *Nuaisuk Dak* apart from other gongs is that its sound travels along the surface of the earth. It is also known as *Si Kou Dak*, meaning 'the messenger gong,' and it is usually played when the Guite chiefs pass away. It is said that the sound of this gong can even be heard from Burma.¹⁶ It is important to note that all gongs originate from Myanmar, but there is also a mythical story associated with the *Nuaisuk*. Folklore tells us that the *Nuaisuk* was taken from Rih Dil, a lake in the Tedim Township. People became aware of the existence of the gongs because they seemed to be close when viewed from a distance, but in reality, they were not. Spirits and animals took turns guarding the gongs. One day, when a frog was guarding the gong, it was stolen. When the spirits discovered that their gong had been stolen, they pursued the thief. The thief left gooseberry leaves behind, which allowed the spirits to count them and delayed their pursuit. Eventually, the thief erected three stone pillars in a way that made the spirits mistake them for five pillars and recount them. When the thief reached his village, the gongs were painted with dog's blood. Upon arriving at the village, the spirits recognized that the gongs were theirs but hesitated to take them back because of the blood that had been painted on them. Instead, they decided to kill the thief. The villagers learned of this and covered the thief's body with fermented pig lard called *sathu* and cloth called *puanpi*. The spirits assumed that the man had died due to the smell of the *sathu* and left the village, realizing it was pointless to take a dead man's possession. In this way, the *Nuaisuk Dak* came into the ownership of the people. The identity of the first owner or clan cannot be determined, but it is said that the Guite chiefs have possessed the gongs since time immemorial. Similar to the *Zamkang*, the *Nuaisuk Dak* was burned in the same event mentioned earlier. However, unlike the *Zamkang*, it did not burn completely but lost its tone.¹⁷

An oral narrative that resonates commonality among the Chin-Kuki-Mizo is the story of an orphan Liandoa and his brother Tuaisiala/Thanghou. Misfortune befell upon them at an early age when their father passed away and soon after, their mother eloped with another man. Could have been one of the most poverty-stricken folktales, the sibling loved each other due to their condition while the villagers held them in disdain and derision. The story invites attention because of

¹⁵ Pauminthang Guite. Personal interview. 2023.

¹⁶ S. Zamdoupau, Personal Interview. 2023.

¹⁷ Guite *Ibid*.

the famous Liando *Dar/Dak*, a *Darbu* but a set of two gongs: one bass tone and the other combining the intermediate and treble tone. There are variations as to how the siblings got hold of the gongs but one story reckons interest. The gong was first owned by Lersia, a Chawngthu chief. Lersia was said to have possessed the gong while he was in Vanlaizawl, a village near Suarbung. He entrusted his brother, Singaia, to sell Liando *dar* along with other gongs and necklaces. While Singaia was at the confluence of Tiau and the river that demarcates the boundary between Vaphai and Chawngtui, he was unfortunately swallowed by a python. The python was found by the game-hunters of Lungbel who killed the python and distributed the meat amongst themselves. Liando and his brother were given the intestines due to their social position. They were apathetic toward their share but decided to cut open the intestine. To their amazement, the intestine was filled with two sets of gongs and necklaces. One of the two sets came to be known as *Liando Dar* while the other was *Tuaichawngi Dar*, the gong given to Tuaichawngi's father by Liando as bride price. The *Liando Dar* produce a melodic sound to the envy of their villagers. But the siblings dared not let their villagers know of the gong, and lied about it as they were afraid of the villagers snatching the gong from them.

The gong was kept by the siblings until they resided in Vangchhia. When they were in Vangchhia, Tuaisiala was said to have been wrestled to death by the youths of the village. Liandova offered the gong to Pukawka the chief of Sesih to avenge the killing of his brother. The gong became the heirloom of Pukawka and his offspring. Lalseipuia, the chief of Khantlang, was said to be the last person to possess the gong. From him, 'the worshippers of snake' borrowed the gong for Rs. 200, and on the third occasion, did not return the gong.¹⁸ In another version, the gong was kept by the Sailo chief Vanhnuailiana. After him, his third son Lalburha, the chief of Vancheng, kept the gong. It is said that when the village of Vancheng burnt, the gong was also lost in the fire.¹⁹

Manufactures

Metal works was a common practice among the Chin-Kuki-Mizo. According to Shakespeare, the knowledge of casting iron was believed to have been acquired from either the plains of India or Burma. This implies that individuals in these regions possessed the expertise and techniques necessary to cast iron, and that this knowledge was eventually acquired by the Chin-Kuki-Mizo people.²⁰ Woodthorpe asserted that the forging techniques employed by the Lushais were akin to those commonly utilized in lower Bengal, indicating that the Lushais had adopted this

¹⁸ Lalmachhuana Zofa: *Mizo Thawnthu*, Vol. IV. Aizawl, Author, 2010.

¹⁹ Zofa *Ibid*.

²⁰ J. Shakespeare: *The Lushei Kuki Clans*. Aizawl, Tribal Research Institute, 2008.

knowledge from Bengali captives.²¹ *Cire perdue* process was applied in making brass and silver ornament and instruments such as bracelets, necklaces, pots, bangles, earrings, and syphon pipes. The Thadou practice of metal work was mentioned by William Shaw, though the practice was taken over by Burmese or other foreign-made products. A person named Tamlopa was said to have made the following at Lhanpelkot and Thijonbung: 1) *Da' pi* – A large Kuki gong; 2) *Da' thibu* – A set of three gongs; 3) *Tuidol* – Large basin; 4) *Lumdal* – Brass plates placed on shields; 5) *Chaldep* – Brass dao-shaped plate worn upright on the head in full dress; 6) *Chinking* – An iron rack with flat serpent-shaped ends to the arms projecting from a central stem; 7) *Chemkol* – An old type of genuine Thadou knife. Besides this, there are no evidence that supports local manufacture of bell-metal gongs.

Conclusion

Societies have relied on oral and written forms of communication throughout human history to communicate and preserve information, tales, customs, and cultural practices. Prior to the invention of writing, humans communicated mostly by oral tradition, which predates written language. It encompasses various forms of spoken communication, including storytelling, folklore, myths, legends, proverbs, and oral histories. Oral traditions rely on memory, repetition, and vocal modes of information transmission from one generation to the next. They frequently exhibit adaptability, improvisation, and the incorporation of regional variances. Apart from the gongs being foreign to the hills of the Indo-Myanmar borderland, it is pertinent to be cognizant of the existence of trade and exchange in *long durée*. Whereas the spatio-temporal credibility of the origin of gongs when referring to oral stories draws suspicion, the interplay between orality and trade suggests that the object is intrinsic to the Chin-Kuki-Mizo in space and time.

²¹ R.G. Woodthorpe: *The Lushai Expedition 1871-72*, London, Hurst and Blackett Publishers, 1873.