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Hsaing Waing: Classical Ensemble of Myanmar

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Abstract

Hsaing Waing is a classical music ensemble and a prominent cultural identity of Myanmar. The *Hsaing Waing* ensemble consists of many instruments such as the *Pat Waing*, *Muang Hsaing*, *Hne*, *Chauk Lon Bat*, *Byaung*, *Wa*, *Wallet Kok*, *Yakin*, *Si*, and *Mong*. The earliest historical record of the *Hsaing Waing* is in 1544 where the *Pat Waing* and possibly the *Hsaing Waing*, was in royal service at the court of King Tabinshwehti of the Taungoo dynasty and prospered under the Kaunbaun dynasty up to colonial rule. During colonization, *Hsaing Waing's* popularity declined but other innovations were introduced such as modern recording mediums and broadcasts which transferred the popularity of *Hsaing Waing* to a broader public audience and brought innovation to religious music, ceremonial rituals, fusion of western musical instruments such as the piano, violin and mandolin. The wealth of knowledge and numbers of connoisseur during the Kaunbaun dynasty led to the transfer of knowledge to many apprentices which were responsible for the development and adaptation and continuation of *Hsaing Waing* during colonization, socialism and independence. The transfer of knowledge was carried out by previous generations through apprentices, family members, close relatives and inspired individuals. The factors for the successful inheritance of *Hsaing Waing* are management, education, musicians and opportunity.

Keywords: Myanmar, Hsaing Waing, Ensemble, Music, Conservation, Inheritance.

1. Introduction

In the East, Myanmar is a heavy weight player when it comes to musical culture. Myanmar music is not standardized like western music but it is still effectual and easy

to memorize. Myanmar musicians are equally proficient in traditional and Western music concepts and techniques. Traditional Myanmar music usually accompanies theatrical performances and singing where dramatic plays and operas are integrated with music. Many traditional aspects of classical Myanmar music is still evident today with innovations introduced according to each period and social trends (Kromphranarathippraphanphong, 2007).

Globalization has increasingly opened up Myanmar to foreign cultures and foreign musical influences which continue to contribute the benefits of modernization to Myanmar society. The acceptance of these social changes and cultural adaptations has however affected traditional Myanmar culture and lifestyles where citizens, especially Myanmar youths are following similar trends like other Southeast Asian youths in the region towards materialism and has diminished the acknowledgement of their indigenous knowledge and cultural heritage.

Hsaing Waing or *Saing Waing* is a classical musical ensemble with multiple roles and is a prominent cultural identity of Myanmar (Niyomtham, 2008). *Hsaing Waing* is Myanmar's national music ensemble that is vividly decorated with artistic style and extravagance. *Hsaing Waing* has two distinct meanings where one means *Poengmang Khok* or *Poengmang* which is a circular set of tuned or graduate drums and the other being a *Wong Piphat* or *Piphat* which is a classical music ensemble with gongs or sets of drums as the lead instrument which is called *Pat Waing* or *Pat Wain*. The *Pat Waing* is made from a set of 18 to 21 drums and is the primary instrument in *Hsaing Waing* ensembles. The *Hsaing Waing* ensemble accompanies rituals and all forms of social events in Myanmar such as regal, religious and social events. Contemporary Myanmar society has also adapted *Hsaing Waing* performances in other numerous rituals such as, Buddhism ordainment rituals, ear piercing rituals, spiritual possessions, graduation events and welcoming celebrations to provide guests with entertainment which is solemn but graceful, delightful and also poignant according to the occasion or event.

2. Research Area and Methodology

This research is a qualitative research study and the tools used in this research include surveys, interview forms, focus group discussions and observation forms. Two methods were applied to data collection in the form of document analysis and field research. The field data was gathered primarily from the study of two Myanmar classical musical ensembles of *Mahayanggon U Sein Ba Mour Mingalasay* in Yangon and *Mandalay Sein Ya Khin* in the city of Mandalay. The field research was conducted from September 2011 to February 2013.

3. Research Results and Discussion

3.1 *Myanmar Music*

Myanmar's history stems from the cultural fusion of the ethnic Pyu, Mon and Rakhine which were already historically established in the region (Becker, 1971). The history of Myanmar music can be studied dating back to the earliest record from Chinese annals during the Tang dynasty. The Tang annals document a musical performance in 800 A.D from the royal court of Pyu. The Pyu ensemble consisted of 14 different types instruments which are

consistent with classical Myanmar instruments today. The Chinese annals also indicated that there were 2 types of lutes or harps and there was a zither with the head of a crocodile which is probably the *Migyaung* or better known as the crocodile zither. This is consistent with Netniyom (2002) in reference to annals from the Chinese court at Chang-an in 802 A.D. describing a Pyu ensemble and dance performed by 35 male and female musicians playing 22 instruments which were classified into 8 groups of metal, conch shell, strings, bamboo, squash, leather, ivory and horn instruments.

Myanmar classical music can be divided into two large categories of hall music and chamber music. The difference between hall and chamber music performances is comparable to exhilarating and gentle forms of music. Hall music in Myanmar is referred locally by many names but is usually based on the name or type of gong, drum or drums used as the principal instrument such as the *Pat Waing* or *Hsaing Waing* ensemble. Chamber music is a traditional ensemble consisting of the *Saung*, *Pattala*, *Migyaung* (zither), *Palwe* (flute) and in the past, included the *Tayaw* (fiddle) and *Hnyin* (small mouth organ) (Tallantyre, 1939).

Classical Myanmar musical instruments are divided into 5 categories according to the materials used for the construction of the instrument or how the instruments are played. The first groups are *Kyei* instruments made from brass or metal which consists of gongs and brass xylophone. The second group are string based instruments or *Kyo* such as the *Saung* or *Saung Gouk* (Myanmar harp) and *Don Min*. The third are leather based instruments or *Thay-ye* such as drums, *Hsaing Waing* or O-zi (Pot drums). Wind instruments or *Lei* such as the oboe and flute make up the forth group and the fifth group consists of percussion instruments or *Let-ko* such as *Wa* (clappers) and *Wa Pattala* (xylophone) (Figure 1) (Narumon, 2008).

The *Hsaing Waing* ensemble plays a very important role in modern Myanmar society and can include up to as many as 12 instruments and be adapted to be appropriate for any occasion. The *Hsaing Waing* is the largest type of music ensemble in Mynamar and is taught in public and private music institutions in the country. The *Hsaing Waing* ensemble consists of many instruments such as the *Pat Waing* (Figure 2), *Muang Hsaing* (Figure 3), Hne (Figure 4), *Chauk Lon Bat* (Figure 5), *Byaung*, *Wa* (clappers), *Wallet Kok*, *Yakin*, *Lin-gwin* (Figure 6), *Si*, and *Mong*. *Hsaing Waing* uses a hemitonic and anhemitonic scale similar to the Gamelan of Indonesia (Fletcher, Laurence, 2004). The *Hsaing Waing* differs greatly in its diversity of instruments and musical style from Thai ensembles (Garifas, 1985). There are 4 types of *Hsaing Waing* ensembles; 1) *Balasai* ensembles are performed at rituals such as Buddhist ordainments, ear piercing rituals, funerals and stupa commemorations. 2) *Yothaysai* is an ensemble which is performed at classical puppet (marionettes) shows. 3) *Zatsai* is an ensemble that accompanies Myanmar dramatic theatre and plays. 4) *Natsai* is an ensemble that accompanies spirit dances and spirit medium rituals. *Hsaing Waing* music is dynamic and the melody and tempo can swing unexpectedly (Pareles, 2003).

3.2 *Pre Colonial Period*

The earliest historical record of the *Pat Waing* in Myanmar is chronicled in the Myanmar royal annals dating back to 1544 where King Tabinshwehti of the Taungoo dynasty was enthralled with the sound of the *Pat Waing* (principle instrument of *Hsaing Waing*) when he was in conquest of a Shan city. King Tabinshwehti was so found of the musical melody and stated that if the conquest was successful, he would pardon all captured musicians and

relocate them to his capital at Taungoo. The context of the annals suggests that this is probably the period when the *Pat Waing* and *Hsaing Waing* ensemble entered royal service at the court of King Tabinshwehti in Taungoo.

During the reign of King Mindon of the Kaunbaun dynasty, increased trade and exchange with foreign countries introduced Myanmar society to many western music and instruments. One of the earliest foreign instruments adopted were the piano and violin but the *Hsaing Waing* still retained its popularity up to the end of the Kaunbaun dynasty. *Hsaing Waing* ensembles and Myanmar classical musicians enjoyed royal patronage where musicians and artists received welcomed recognition and connoisseurs received special honors, titles and handsome rewards for their achievements. Renowned Myanmar musicians during 1857 – 1885 received grand titles of governors and village chieftains. Some were entitled with the right to collect taxes from community members as their monthly income. During the reign of King Mindon, these honored musicians and artists started receiving regular monthly salaries from the royal government (Singer, 1992).

3.3 *Colonial Period*

Myanmar was colonized from 1886-1948. The end of the Kaunbaun dynasty signaled the end of independence for Myanmar and opened up an area of major western influence. The lack of royal audiences meant that there was no opportunity and patronage from the royal court that was needed to sustain *Hsaing Waing* musicians because all Myanmar royals were exiled to India. Many *Hsaing Waing* musicians relocated to rural communities and adapted their skills and crafts to provide entertainment and services to the general public. Public support became the primary source of income for *Hsaing Waing* ensembles and their families. The adaptation from royal court to public audiences created outdoor *Hsaing Waing* performances called *Mye Waizat*. The integration of *Hsaing Waing* ensembles in public theatres, marionettes shows, ordainment rituals, funerals and social festivities partially restored popularity to *Hsaing Waing* music. The outdoor performances and public support rooted *Hsaing Waing* ensembles at traditional rituals and social events throughout the country. The increase in Western influence introduced Myanmar audiences to silent movies and also influenced the creation of music ensembles to accompany cinemas, Buddhism rituals, created revolutionary music, patriotic music, propaganda music and music to support the marketing industry through advertisements promoting indigenous handicrafts and Myanmar cigarettes and tobacco. Vinyl records were also introduced and opened up the music industry providing an opportunity for *Hsaing Waing* ensembles to reach nationwide audiences. Traditional *Hsaing Waing* music had to be adapted to the new vinyl media where the songs had to be reduced to the 5-6 minute limitations of each record. *Hsaing Waing* ensembles, especially the *Pat Waing* were also enhanced where the entire drum cage and gong frames were now completely gilded with gold. Other enhancements included the introduction of intricate carvings on the large gong stands and beams carved as the mythical creature, the *Naga*. Efforts to revitalize the *Hsaing Waing* from the colonial period up to independence however did increase the number of female *Pat Waing* musicians.

3.4 *Independence, Socialism and Modernization*

After 96 years of piecemeal colonization, Myanmar finally received independence in 1948. The direct and in-direct adoption of western culture influenced new generations of musicians who favored western music and instruments. Traditional *Hsaing Waing* ensembles were confined to religious rituals and traditional events. The advent of magnetic recording mediums such as cassette tapes was introduced during socialism and many contemporary music bands were created which popularized the electric guitar and drum sets. Rock and Roll and disco were also very popular during this period but was heavily subdued early on by the government. Contemporary music bands that adopted western songs and included only western musical instruments were called *Thiwai*. The guitar was the most popular instrument among *Thiwai* bands. Even though *Thiwai* band's popularity surpassed traditional *Hsaing Waing* ensembles, but the introduction of western culture also created other innovations to indigenous folk music such as the creation of Myanmar country music which brought about the popularity of the mandolin instrument. The legs and beams of the large gong stands in *Hsaing Waing* ensembles also received additional innovations in which they were carved in the figure of the imaginative creature *Bencharup* or *Pingsarupa* (Figure 7). The *Bencharup* is an artistically inspired creature created with the elements from 5 natural animals. The *Bencharup* gong stand's head is carved with an elephant trunk and tusks, legs like a horse, body with wings and a tail of a fish. The *Bencharup* is regarded as an inspirational creature that provides protection from evil and is a symbol of strength and agility. Development of the *Hsaing Waing* during this period also included the introduction of half notes so that the *Hsaing Waing* ensemble could accompany contemporary compositions with greater ease and appeal to the masses.

3.5 *Myanmar and Thai Music*

Thailand and Myanmar are neighboring countries where there have been many cultural exchanges adaptations and integration of musical cultures which continue up to modern times. During the reign of King Bodawpaya (sixth king of the Kaunbaun Dynasty) in 1788, Myanmar composers and musicians successfully completed the translation and transcription of Thai music from Ayutthaya and replaced them with Myanmar words and phrases while preserving the original melody, tone and rhythm. The music and songs were referred to as *Phleng Yothaya* or *Phleng Yodaya* (music of Yothaya) and was introduced throughout Myanmar. *Phleng Yothaya* was initially performed by direct translation of the original words from the songs which were classical Thai music that accompanied literary adaptations of Ramayana and *Inao*, but later versions were later changed to using Myanmar words and expressions that were not related to the original. The integration of contemporary western music in Myanmar today shares the same similarity which was implemented with *Phleng Yothaya.* This is consistent with Rungruang (2008) where a Myanmar musician named *Myawadi Minci U Sa* also known as *Wunci U Sa* who was born in 1766, played a vital role in the adaptation and integration of Thai music into Myanmar culture. *Wunci U Sa* modified and incorporated Thai music to Myanmar military activities and also composed many classical Myanmar music and songs for the royal court. He received honor and fame from King Mindon of the Kaunbaun dynasty in 1853. *Wunci U Sa* was tasked with creating principle musical pieces for the military and received royal permission to study under Thai music instructors that were in custody in Myanmar. He also studied Thai literary works and performing arts such as

Ramayana and King Rama II's version of *Inao* which were very popular with the royal Myanmar audiences.

3.6 *Conservation and Inheritance of Hsaing Waing*

Creating a *Hsaing Waing* ensemble relies on many factors such as having expert musical skills, a competent level of public recognition, authority on *Hsaing Waing* and sufficient funds to purchase the musical instruments because most classical *Hsaing Waing* instruments are still very expensive. The factors for the successful inheritance of *Hsaing Waing* are management, education, musicians and opportunity.

Management: The manager of *Hsaing Waing* ensemble is responsible for every administrative activity of the ensemble such as accepting contracts, responsibility for the musicians and arranging transportation. Managers are solely responsible to secure performance contracts where most employers usually arrange in advance and some are even booked for the following year which is usually important ritual events such as spiritual dances and spirit medium ceremonies. After engagements have been agreed, the manager will make sure that all musicians are aware of the contract so that they can prepare their schedule and commit to the event. Most musicians within *Hsaing Waing* ensembles are relatives, students and friends who live within the community. The transportation cost is provided by the manager and is separate from the performance wages. Sometimes the contract and performance requires several days to complete and most of the musicians usually take lodge at the manager's home. Some musicians rely entirely on the manager for their livelihoods where they eat, live and for financial support. Musicians in the ensemble are treated like family members. The price of the contract and fee of the musicians is also determined by the manager even if the prospect came from a connection from one of the musicians in the group. *Hsaing Waing* music ensembles also accept performance contracts that are not related to *Hsaing Waing* music such as *Zatpwe* or Myanmar dramatic theatre. All *Hsaing Waing* ensembles share these characteristics and managers and musicians are in agreement that the managers are pivotal to the survival and prosperity of the ensemble.

Education: The inheritance of *Hsaing Waing* is primarily conducted through internal education within the ensemble where classes are usually held in the evening or when it is convenient for the ensemble's instructor at his home. Learning *Hsaing Waing* is conducted during practices which are usually rehearsed at the manager's home. Learning *Hsaing Waing* music is primarily conducted through three techniques of 1) Following the demonstration of musical chapters from teachers. 2) Recitation of musical notes, followed by actual performance of the instrument and 3) Instrumental reproduction of a song. Primary music education centers in Myanmar for the *Hsaing Waing* are at the University of Culture, Rangoon and the University of Culture, Mandalay. Music education in Myanmar is currently only available at higher education while primary and secondary levels are mostly introductory and not systematically supported.

Musicians: The inheritance of *Hsaing Waing* through musicians comes from the knowledge transfer from previous generation and modern *Hsaing Waing* musicians. *Hsaing Waing* musicians in the past were very important and were principle in the transfer of knowledge to the present generation of musicians. The music renaissance of Myanmar classical music during the Kaunbaun dynasty created many authorities in classical Mynamar music and

propelled the *Hsaing Waing* and *Pat Waing* as the symbol of Myanmar classical music. The profusion of classical music scholars during this period directly contributed for the continuation of *Hsaing Waing* music ensembles in modern day Myanmar. The wealth of knowledge and numbers of connoisseur during this period also led to the transfer of knowledge to many apprentices which were responsible for the development and adaptation of *Hsaing Waing* during colonization, independence, socialism and modern times. The transfer of knowledge and skills of *Hsaing Waing* and *Pat Waing* was carried out by the music masters of previous generations through apprentices and sustained through transmission of knowledge within the family, close relatives and inspired individuals. There are now many *Hsaing Waing* experts and musicians in modern day Myanmar. Most are employed at music institutions throughout the country and are also professional musicians. Similarity between previous and current generations of *Hsaing Waing* musicians is that both continue to inherit their musical knowledge and skills in the same manner where they received guidance and instructions through close relatives such as from their father, mother, grandfather, grandmother and from their relatives while they gained experience and development individually from other music instructors.

Opportunity: The opportunity for the inheritance of *Hsaing Waing* can be accomplished by individual interest, music education and through tourism. Inheritance of *Hsaing Waing* can be achieved by interested individuals who have a passion for knowledge and enjoy the experience of their culture, tradition, history and Jataka tales which could be observed and witnessed from *Hsaing Waing* performances during traditional rituals, cultural festivities and exhibitions. The significance and knowledge which is passed on by experiencing *Hsaing Waing* performances is the indirect inheritance of the indigenous knowledge and skills of previous generations of musicians. Music education is an important factor in sustaining the musical culture of Myanmar. The methodology used in teaching *Hsaing Waing* is similar with most Southeast Asian neighbors where traditional music education was usually conducted at the teacher's home, temple, royal palace, pagodas' and through the public education system. Tourism in Myanmar has greatly expanded and the country's religious and cultural destinations have attracted many visitors who have travelled to experience Myanmar cultural treasures. Tourism has also become an important source of income for the government. The expansion of tourism has also created many more venues and opportunities for *Hsaing Waing* musicians. The increase in performances brought upon by tourism also means an increase in the musician's incomes and increases the inheritance and development of *Hsaing Waing*. Tourism has elevated the living standards and prominence of Myanmar classical musicians and has influenced children and younger generations to follow and learn their cultural heritage.

4. Conclusion

The primary role of *Hsaing Waing* ensembles is to support auspicious, inauspicious rituals and especially rituals that are related to religion. The ensemble's performance is to provide a prelude to the rituals and endow the ceremony with a pious and merry atmosphere. This is consistent with Satsa-nguan (2000) where humans have spiritual needs requiring serenity of the mind and peace which can be fulfilled through music, beliefs and rituals. The cultural activities such as musical performances, beliefs and rituals all contribute to the strength and longevity of culture in the community. The inheritance of *Hsaing*

Waing continues to be past down through the generations and inherited primarily through oral tradition. Persistent support and development policies must be continued through passing on the knowledge to children and youths by nurturing the love and interest of Myanmar classical music and acknowledgement of the value of the indigenous knowledge of their ancestors. Even though *Hsaing Waing's* popularity is not as popular as it used to be, but it is still recognized as the definitive symbol of Myanmar classical music. *Hsaing Waing* continues to be popular among Buddhism and patriotic music and is customary at cultural exhibitions, classical theatre, puppet (marionettes) shows, spiritual, traditional and government functions. The Myanmar government has given importance to the conservation of *Hsaing Waing* and indigenous performing arts. The Myanmar government continues to organize annual competitions and ensure that Myanmar classic music receives substantial air time on public broadcast systems such as television and radio broadcasts (Oranut, 2008).

5. Suggestions and Recommendations

Future research topics should include on the development of a guideline to increase added value to *Hsaing Waing* ensembles and extend the research on the conservation and revitalization of Myanmar classical instruments and ensembles.

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Figure 1. *Wa Pattala* (Xylophone)

Figure 2. *Pat Waing* (Drum Circle) lead instrument in *Hsaing Waing* ensemble.

Figure 3. *Muang Hsaing* (Framed Gongs)

Figure 4. *Hne* (Oboe)
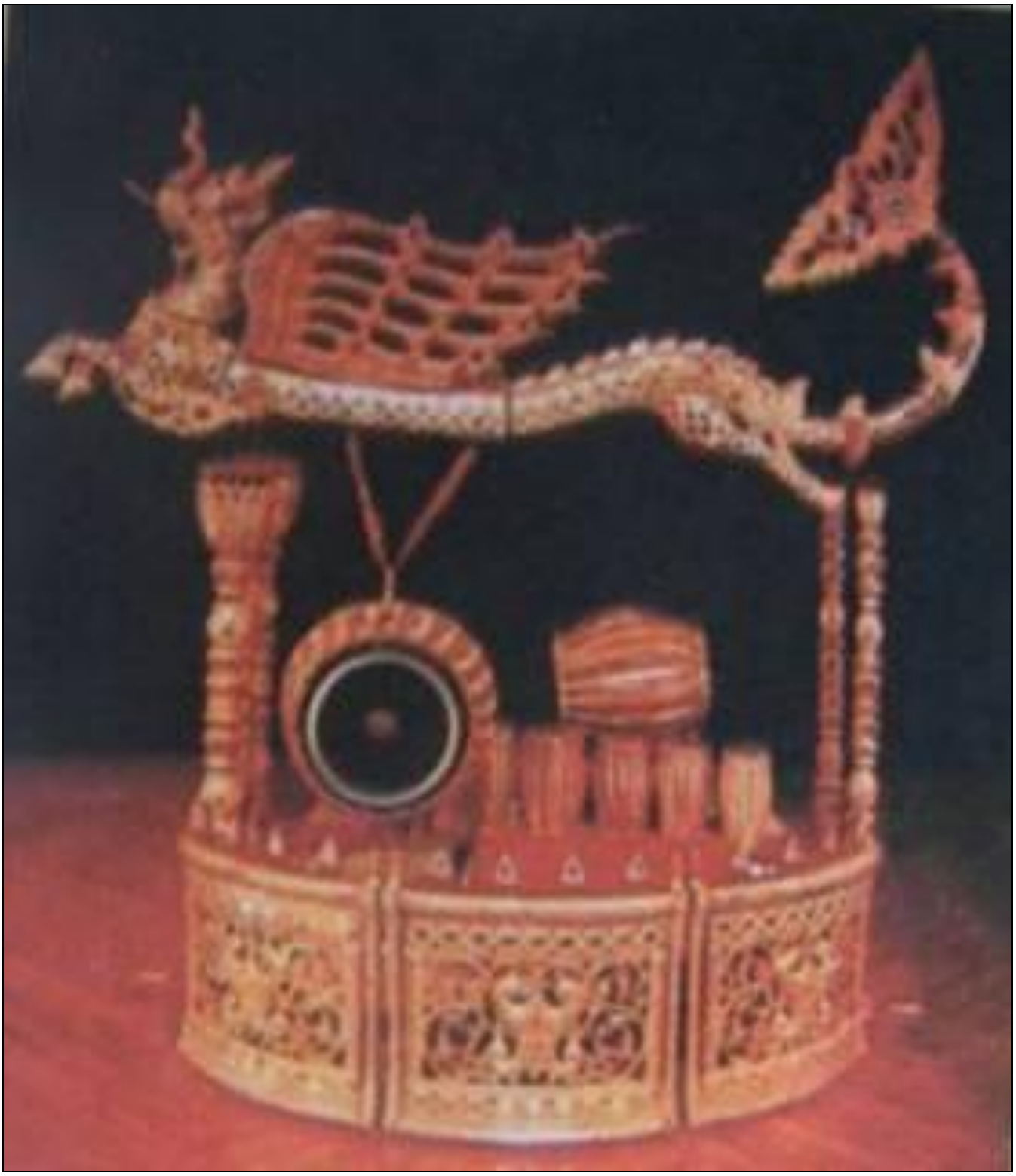
Figure 7. *Bencharup* or *Pingsarupa* Patma (Gong) stand.