

MON MUSIC of BURMA

The Mon

The traditional music of the Mon people is vanishing, endangered and barely known even to Asian traditional music connoisseurs. Historically the Mon were a dominant, highly cultured, and influential people in Burma more than a thousand years ago - as well as parts of present-day Thailand and Cambodia. There are approximately one million Mon in Burma (2% of the total population) mostly in Mon State.

The Mon appeared in Burma starting in the 2nd century B.C. They became the first highly developed Buddhist culture in parts of present day Burma, Thailand, and Cambodia. Many of the important old Buddhist texts are inscribed in Mon, as well as Pali and Sanskrit. Around the 8th or 9th centuries the Bamar (or Burmans) began to enter and rise in power and influence. A long and complicated struggle began, the Burmese eventually prevailed, and the Mon faded into the background. The Mon had largely merged with Burmese culture, as well - importantly - the Burmese had absorbed, and made 'Burmese' much of the Mon culture.

Usually when one speaks of minorities in Burma one is speaking of 'hill tribes', with the exception of the Mon. The Mon have their own language, writing system, rich history, and customs, but are taking on more and more Burmese and Western pop influences. There are several instruments peculiar to the Mon. Most recognizable is the Kyam (crocodile zither), a 3-string long zither with frets that is shaped like a crocodile. Another is the Batt Kine, a row of 14 or so pitched gongs that is upturned at both

ends like a crescent. Also, there is the Mon violin, a 3-string fiddle with a western-like body played upright.

There is, currently, an effort by concerned Mon people to revive and preserve Mon culture, language, and identity, and this recording will help further this effort.

RICK HEIZMAN earthviewmusic@yahoo.com

MON INSTRUMENTS

(the names are given first in Mon language, then in Burmese)

Kyam (migyaung, mi kyaung or mijaun) - The kyam is perhaps the most distinctive Mon instrument. It is often referred as the crocodile zither, and in Burmese language it is called migyaung, mi kyaung or mijaun. A 3-string, long, fretted zither, the body is carved into a crocodile shape. The strings are usually tuned approximately to F-C-F. Usually the melody is played on one string while the others are used as a drone. Sometimes 2 or 3 strings will be played in parallel. The strings are plucked and strummed with a plectrum made of ivory, horn, wood or bamboo. The 7-13 frets are attached to the body with beeswax and the bridge is a thin piece of bamboo on top of a small wooden box, slightly sloped, allowing the strings to buzz.

According to an ancient tale, the basic melodies of the kyam were derived from the humming of the crocodile named Nga Moe Yeik (Rain Cloud), a companion of Prince Nandar, who was the son of King Okkalapa of Dagon (former Yangon).

This kind of instrument exists in nearby Thailand and Cambodia (known as the jakhe), and as far away as Borneo, but without the crocodile shape.

Bat Kine (La Chan) - Another uniquely Mon instrument is the row of gongs known as the Bat Kine. Rather than the circular set of

tuned gongs used in Burmese, Thai, Cambodian, and Laotian music, the Bat Kine is shaped like a quarter full moon, upturned steeply on both ends. Usually there are 14 tuned gongs in the set. Some of the tunings of the gongs are roughly (from low to high):
GACDEGABCDEFGA, GACDEFGABCDEFG, or with 15 gongs
FGACDEFGABCDEFG

Pone Pon (Doe Gyaung) - Underpinning most Mon (and Burmese) music is a small set of drums played by one player. This set is known as the Hta Bone Pone Pon. It has 4 small drums, a medium drum, and a large drum. Tuning of the drums is variable depending on the tune, and the players choice. These drums act as a percussive and simple melodic 'bass' part.

Graw (Taung Tayaw) - This 'Upright Viola' is an old and rare Mon traditional instrument. It has a western-looking body, but strung with only 3 strings. Before the British colonizers came there were some traditional 2 or 3 string fiddle instruments (probably similar to the Thai so duang or so sam sai, or the Chinese erhu). After the British came musicians copied the body stylings of the western violin and perhaps added a string. The Graw is, however, played in an Asian style - that is while sitting cross-legged with the instrument resting on one leg rather than tucked under the chin. The bowing is more like a cello technique. Sometimes a scratchy sound is preferred (as in track number 8).
The strings are tuned (low to high) F C G.

Battala (Pattala) - 23-key bamboo xylophone. The keys are soaked for up to three years to elicit the best timbre.

Kha dae-Kha bart (Si-wa) - In almost all Mon and Burmese music one hears the small cymbals and the wood clacker that serve a time-keeping function.

Khanwe (Hne) - a double reed oboe-like instrument.

Talutt (Palwei) - A bamboo flute of various sizes and types of bamboo.

MUSICIANS

Nai Htaw Paing --Kyam, Batt Kine, Battala, Pone Pon

Mi Mya Than --Singer

Min Han Win Aung --Kyam, Kha dae-Kha bart

Nai Mya Nyein --Graw, Battala, Pone Pon

Nai Kyaw Win -- Khanwe, Talutt

NAI HTAW PAING - leader of this group. Kyam, Batt Kine, Battala, Pone Pon

Currently serves as an assistant lecturer at Yangon Cultural University. Started studying Mon traditional musical instruments, singing, and dance from his father, Nai Khin Maung Gyi, in 1965. Regularly performs on Mon National Days, Mon State Day, Union Day, and other important receptions. He occasionally teaches the new generation of musicians but has difficulty finding time given the economic situation of the profession. He would like more Mon nationals to be aware of both their own music, Myanmar traditional music and other world musics. He is passionate about rediscovering and preserving the endangered arts of the Mon culture.

MI MYA THAN--Singer

She has been a student of Mon traditional teachers such as Nai Shwe Pyi and Nai San Shein. She also is passionate about preserving and presenting ancient Mon traditional dance and music. Mi Mya Than runs

Mon dance and music classes especially for young people so that they can be well versed in their endangered traditions, and also introduces ideas to modernise their music and dance while still being grounded upon traditional patterns. Aside from performing and teaching Mon dance, (traditional & modern), Mon songs and Mon culture she participates in many annual festivals held in Mon State.

MIN HAN WIN AUNG--Kyam, Kha dae-Kha bart

Serves as a Director General of the Meteorological Department of Thaton township. He has been studying Mon traditional musical instruments since 1986. Regularly performs on Mon National Days, Mon State Day, Union Day, and other events. He presently is teaching some of the next generation of players. Again, has difficulty maintaining a teaching relationship due to the severity of the economic situation. Students cannot afford to buy instruments. Min Han Win Aung is interested in creating cross-over (fusion) music with other kinds of music and musicians.

NAI MYA NYEIN--Graw, Battala, Pone Pon

Besides the Mon violin, he can also play mandolin and bamboo xylophone (battala).

He composes, paints, and makes bamboo xylophones to earn a living. He has served as a member of the Mon State Culture Troupe and learned from old traditional masters.

He participates in every annual festival held by the Mon State Government.

NAI KYAW WIN-- Khanwe, Talutt

Earns his living by producing hand made instruments, including; violins, upright fiddle and kyam, saung gauk, khanwe and talutt, He is also an accomplished sculptor. Since 1980 he has been performing for many traditional and religious occasions and studying Mon traditional music. He also teaches on days when he and his students aren't working and at orphanages in Mon State for no pay. He would like to

study more music of the world and in the future would like to teach drawing, painting, wood handicrafts, and also Mon literature to those who are interested.

SELECTIONS

1 - *Gwet-Pwa-Kit*

ensemble, vocal

This is one of the oldest traditional Mon melodies. The song simulates the shimmering jewel-like reflections on the river as the breeze blows gently across the water.

It is also composed of words instructing not to forget the five honorables of Buddhism: the Lord Buddha, the Damma (the Buddha's teachings), the Sanga (the community of monks and nuns), Parents, and Teachers.

2 - *Gwet-Done Glone*

ensemble, vocal

This is a song about the skills of navigating boats. The words encourage the sailors to be courageous, diligent, and united with each other on board their boats. It is normally played when a play or opera is depicting a voyage.

3 - *Ma Ngo - Paya Ta Ngwe*

Batt Kine solo

This song expresses homage and sacrifice to the Kalutt spirits (in Burmese - Nat spirits).

4 - *Rom-sai-Da kauf*

ensemble

This song is about the Da kauf - a giant demon (in Burmese - Beluu). It is performed when the story or play is about the sinful manners of brutish or tyrannical people.

5 - *Gewk-laked-done*

ensemble, vocal

This is a piece concerning the 'Kalutts'. The 32 Kalutts are powerful and

influential spirits to Mon people. While not inherently Buddhist, they are very intertwined with the Buddhist culture in Mon. The words of the song say that the guardian spirits have been cordially invited to come and enjoy a Kalutt dance ceremony, and the ceremony holder will be blessed to be successful in his business, and all of his family will be healthy.

6 - Dosa Kyam - The King Crocodile's Anger

Kyam solo

The melody of this song is based on an old Mon traditional tune, but it is modified with more aggressive and rapid playing. This type of tune is rarely played in Mon State nowadays.

7 - Waygoon-Maygoon

ensemble, vocal, fiddle

This song exemplifies the connection between Mon poems and some Mon songs. There are nine types of Mon poems. Some are composed of only two word stanzas, and some are up to ten word stanzas. This particular song is performed at a welcoming ceremony to Lord Buddha upon his return to earth after preaching in the Noble Spirit Kingdom.

8 - Smar-Gwet

ensemble, vocal, 'scratchy' Mon fiddle

The name of this piece means: song for the dance of the Princess and the Prince duo. The melody is a very old Mon traditional song. The words consist of loving conversations, and a bit of irony and admiration from the beloved couple. It is normally played on the Kyam.

9 - Sone Jar Saryar

flute solo

A song of tiny chattering birds. It is comprised of parts of melodies from Nat songs.

10 - Gwet-htub

Htub drum tune

Htub is the Mon word for the drum known in Burmese as ozi. The htub or ozi is a very long single headed goblet shaped drum. It is used in processions, as well as in folk-based dances.

11 - *Gwet-rom-sai-che*
ensemble

As the rhythm of this song suggests, it is about horse riding activities. It is normally performed when a story or play has a horse galloping act.

12 - *Day Sa Midum*
battala solo

Some pattala players play this kind of piece in a slow and grand style, but others play in a more dynamic style. Mon musicians play in both styles.

13 - *Kalutt Hapor*
ensemble, vocal

This song is about the establishment of the great Shwedagon Pagoda, which was built by King Okkalapa of Dagon (former Yangon), and Sas Mane Aim, the mythical king of the Supreme Noble Spirit Realm.

Credits

Produced in Burma and the United States by Rick Heizman

Assistant producer in Burma: Ko Doo

Recorded at Khin Sabe Oo Studios, Yangon, Burma.

Recorded with Tascam DA-88 digital recorder

Recording engineers: Nanda Kyaw, Aung Zaw Moe, Nai Win Oo, Ye Soe

Mixing Engineer: Henry Kaiser, Berkeley, California

Photos by Rick Heizman