

*D Simons, p. 1*

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### Gong Culture: A Survey of East Asian Gong Traditions

The Gong is a medium for societies and individuals to gather together, reaffirm their shared connection, and through music, sound, and ritual approach their deities, demons and mythologies. "*The concept of sound as a way to let the spirit world know you are around is found in many cultures*" (Brooks, Iris)(1). The Gong is also a measure of time: cycles within the day (when the clock strikes), and cycles of musical time. "*It occasionally has been recognized, but not adequately explored, that cyclic principles underlie nearly all gong ensemble music in Java, not just gamelan music*" (Goldsworthy, David) (2). Gong is an entrance, and gong signifies the end. Gong is reverence, and yet in the wrong place the gong is foolish, pretentious and mocking. The word *Gong* is supposed to have come from Java; the name is also its sound. (Brinner, Benjamin) (3). This paper will examine and trace gong cultures in Asia that emanated from China with the development of iron and bronze, and traveled through the countries known as Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Burma , Malaysia and Indonesia, and if we are to make a full circle, (in the shape of a gong) up to the Philippines and Korea. Each of these modern countries have traditions that predate Western intervention. Some of these traditions are kept alive by semi-isolated minority tribal groups (Vietnam), while others are world renown as tourist destinations because of their gong culture (Bali). The scope of Gong Culture study would touch upon territories as vast as archaeology, anthropology, ethnomusicology, cultural

history and migrations, as well as the modern concept of neurological effects of gong-induced trance states. The comparative study of gong shapes and new developments in the making of gongs, new musical techniques and contexts of gong playing will be examined. Naturally this paper will have to be limited to a survey of some existing literature on the subjects mentioned, but also point a way to further the study of Gong Culture, and whether or not such a comprehensive survey currently exists.

## **ORIGINS**

As we begin back in the BRONZE AGE (3300–1200 BC) advanced metallurgy was needed to combine copper and tin to make this alloy called bronze- the gong recipe is variable, but is approximately 76% copper/22% tin, plus varying trace amounts of lead, iron and zinc (sometimes even silver). However, iron gongs and tuned keys are still made today. (Grinnell College in Iowa has an iron gamelan made in Yogyakarta in 1983). *Dong Son* bronze drums were said to be made in Vietnam around 700 BC, although the earliest origins of these drums is highly disputed by the Chinese. The Vietnamese scholar Vu Tang proclaimed in 1974 that he dated one (Vietnam) bronze drum to the 13th-10th centuries BCE (Han Xiaorong) (4). These ancient bronze age drums have been found throughout SE Asia. They are not only musical instruments but also contain on the surface and sides images of historical importance: battles, planting rituals, cultural artifacts depicting clothing and weapons, bird images (symbolic of the Vietnamese people) frogs, and decorations that could help place the the date, and through the iconography, the people who made the instrument.

But bronze drums, ancient as they may be, are not gongs, per se. A gong is free hanging, with nothing impeding the vibration. It is struck, most commonly, with a soft beater so that the lowest fundamental tone will sound. This tone is often so low that you feel it vibrating your thorax as much as you hear it with your ears. Possibly the most awesome sound of a deep gong is not what you hear but what you feel. In this way, the power and authority of gong will frighten foes and make non-believers convert.

D Simons, p. 3

"If we superimpose the social system onto the gamelan orchestra, the gong is the undisputed king, the ultimate authority." (Rebecca Miatke) (5).



In Chinese history, gongs are mentioned around 500 A.D., attributed to a nation called HSI YU between Tibet and Burma during the reign of emperor Hsuan Wu. **But it is understood that gongs were probably in use far earlier.** "According to Javanese mythology, the gamelan orchestra originated from one gigantic gong which was created by the god Syang Hang Manikmayu for the purpose of communication with the other gods." (Miatke). As different messages were needed to be communicated, a second and third gong were made, each with a different pitch. This was said to be the first gamelan, of 3 notes, in the Javanese year 167 (circa 230 A.D.) (Jennifer Lindsay) (6). (the date is attributed to R.T. Warsodiningrat). **Gamelan** is the name for the indigenous percussive orchestra of Indonesia, which typically performs on tuned bronze instruments: keyed slabs, knobbed pots and suspended gongs. The Javanese Gong culture is so evolved that their instruments are given names, adorned with offerings, and even have gender. The *wadon* is large and female; the *lanang* is male, smaller and higher pitch. (Grove Dictionary of Music, v 2 )(7).

photo:

National Music Museum  
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## KOREA

Gongs made of polished stone are found in Confucianary orchestras in Korea. These date from the Koryo Dynasty of China (1111), and were restored to their original musical state by King Sejong (1418-1450). (8). Even after Confucius' (551-479 BC) influence waned in China, it is preserved in the A'ak classical Confucian music of Korea.



Another Gong culture within Korea is the exciting “farmer's band” of **Samul Nori**. Translated literally it means “4 objects playing”, and refers to the musicians playing and dancing with their four percussion instruments: two drums and two gongs. *Kwengguari* (small gong) is made of bronze and the performer strikes it with a wood stick. *Jing* is a larger gong of bronze. A groove spirals on the surface, and it is played with a large soft mallet on the first beat of each rhythmic section (9) [note: by *section* the writer is signifying measure, or length of rhythmic cell]. The musicians can also wear long colorful ribbons trailing out of their headpieces, which they twirl around with their heads while playing. (personal observation)(9b).

## PHILLIPINE KULINTANG

Kulintang is a set of eight small bossed gongs in graduated sizes, horizontally laid on a rack, like a Javanese bonang, or more like the Balinese riong. **Kulintang** is also the type of ensemble music which uses



these pots among other gongs and drums. The kulintang was thought to have been brought from China in the 3rd century AD, and today is rooted on the southern island of Mindanao. The music's pre-Hispanic, pre-Muslim roots, now serves as a cultural icon of pan-Filipino-American unity. (Gregg Butensky) (10). "Like many kulintang musicians, Danongan "Danny" Kalanduya began by steadying the large agung gongs when they swayed back and forth as the older musicians struck them. At the age of seven, he began to study the other instruments – the goblet-shaped drum, the small "timekeeper" gong, and the four-gong set from his relatives. In 1976, a Rockefeller grant brought Kalanduyan to the University of Washington in Seattle as an artist-in-residence in ethnomusicology." (Butensky). He now teaches kulintang in the San Francisco Bay area of the U.S.



The **Agung** (hand held larger individual gong) is usually performed while standing beside the instrument, holding the upper edge of its flange between the thumb and other fingers with the left hand while striking the knob with the right hand. The mallets are made from short sticks padded with soft material such as rubber. (Hila, Antonio) (11) . These agung orchestras often perform at social events. They play either homophonically (as a single melodic line), or in an interlocking fashion. Agung gong instruments could have originated from Indonesia, as the word is from Malay/Bahasa. Thomas Forest wrote in 1776 that Filipinos were "fond of musical gongs which came from Cheribon on Java and have round knobs on them." (12).



## VIETNAM

In November of this year, 2009, the first International Gong Festival was held in Gia Lai Province, Vietnam.

The festival featured the Central Highlands' gong culture, a unique Vietnamese art form recognized as an Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO.

There were 22 ethnic groups and ensembles from

Cambodia, Indonesia, Philippines, Laos and Myanmar. (D.Trung, )(13) During the four-day festival, 63 domestic and foreign groups of gong players gave special performances using their particular collections of gongs. Pham The Dung, Chairman of the Gia Lai People's Committee closed the festival with a call to preserve and promote the value of gong for peace, solidarity, friendship and development . (source:VOV [Voice of Vietnam])(14) .

Possibly one of the world's largest gongs was cast for the event and inscribed with beautiful patterns and images of ethnic minority people from the Tay Nguyen [Central Highlands.\(14b\)](#)

[\(see above image\).](#) UNESCO recognized "The Space of Gong Culture" which was interpreted by Dutch anthropologist and former Ford Foundation cultural advisor Oscar Salemink as "The concept of space may refer to the cultural space in which ritual gong music and dance is enacted ... and also the political, economic and social space as the context for gong culture" (15)



Traditional gong music was the first casualty of the neon lights and blaring synthesizers that invaded the first International Gong Festival.

Professor Oscar Salemink, of VU University Amsterdam and a prominent scholar on Vietnam, said “ the program had little to do with a real gong festival in terms of cultural features”. (16)

***The very disappointing review of the Gong Festival continues:*** “The only part of the show that garnered major praise was a visit to Dak Ro Wa Commune, where *Kon Jo Ri* villagers gave what was considered a more authentic version of the gong’s song and dance. They performed in front of their old stilt houses, where they still live, using only the light of a bonfire to see. Silhouetted by the fire and night, the villagers and their gongs were in their element deep in the forest surrounded by nature.” (17) Vietnam gongs consist of two main types, “cong” and “chieng”. “Cong” has a knob in the middle, while “chieng” has none. *Cong* makes deep bass sounds, but “melodies have to be coaxed out” of *chieng*. (i.e. it is unpitched).

## THAILAND



The Khong Wong Yai, is the traditional gong circle from Thailand, tuned to 7 equi-distant pitches. This gong circle plays melodic passages in several types of classical ensembles (18), in particular the Phipat style. The circular stand for the series of gongs is a framework made of round

rattan, between which the gongs are suspended, (Japp Kunst.) (19)

Related to the Gong Cultures of Indonesia, "The *sarons* and *khong wong yai* are merely the instruments which come closest to this melody which is not performed but ‘heard’ internally, so Thai and Javanese percussion ensembles share this intriguing and beautiful paradox" (Dr. Bussakorn Sumrongthong)(20) .



## BALI



I was present at the birthing of the Millennial Gong in Bali. There to perform my composition *Music for Theremin and Gamelan* at the Sacred Rhythm Millennial Percussion Festival in UBUD, the big Gong was sounded on midnight Jan 1, 2000. It was auspicious, but anti-climactic, unfortunately; nowhere near as powerful as the Gong Kebyar gamelan orchestras of Bali. Miguel Covarrubias, in his influential and artfully researched 1937 book "Island of Bali" (21) describes his first encounter with the music which "reached a furious climax" and then later "enriched by rhapsodical ornamentation on the high instruments against the measured basses and reverberations of the deep gongs." For him it was "an Oriental ultra-modern Bach fugue, an astounding combination of bells, machinery and thunder." (206-207). One of the first high quality recordings of Balinese Gamelan groups to reach the West is *Music from the Morning of the World* (22), on the Nonesuch label, originally released 1967, and its sequel, *Gamelan of the Love God*. From the liner notes by Robert Brown (my first gamelan teacher): "This recording, then, is a kind of time warp back to that wonderful period in Bali before the Second World War, when such people as [Colin] McPhee, Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson, Miguel Covarrubias, Walter Spies, and others were creating the legend of a paradise on earth called Bali."(22b)





"Gong" refers to either the name of an instrument or the name of an orchestra; "Kebyar" means to burst into light or sound. The instruments used in **Gong Kebyar** are tuned to a five-note scale called pelog. (23) Gong Kebyar is considered the 20th century music of Bali - the centuries-old gamelan music has gone through various changes and evolutions in accordance with the dynamic social and cultural developments that have taken place there. (24) In Bali, there are around thirty-five different types of gamelan. Among the rarely heard is the seven tone semara pagulingan, a remnant of the court era. [19th century]. Today, this repertoire is endangered or, in many cases, extinct. (Vaughan Hatch)(25).



## **NEW STUDIES and NEW WORKS**

Perhaps because the low gongs vibrate a listeners' entire physical being, very often a “trance state” is associated with gong rituals. Whether they are part of a hybrid spiritual practice or a sacred traditional music/drama performance, both the witnesses and the performers are subject to trance. It is known that physical links in the brain result from past experiences: perceptions and actions stimulate the grouping of neurons, bundling and mapping.

Communally enacted rituals help to create these maps that are continually reconfigured by the brain (26). We can analyze the changes that occur within a person's brain in this context and understand why and how some people enter a trance or “deep listening” state. As Judith Becker affirms in her book *Deep Listeners*, trance is an evolutionary adaptive strategy, important for community bonding.(27) Moreover, that a gong continues to vibrate in it's own rhythm long after it is struck “contributes to temporal ambiguity and confirms the gong's dual function of indicating time and timelessness.” (28)

Another new musical context of Gong Culture is the GONG-HUMPING CEREMONY. (29)

This is the title of my composition for the **Gamelan Son of Lion** and it is also a new technique of playing the gongs. Briefly put, I'm exploring the ways musicians relate to their instruments as an extension of their own bodies, the fetishizing and obsessing over the instruments, the magical properties that are given to them (The Red Violin, The Magic Flute, The Tin Drum).

Gong Humping is a new technique I have developed where the player dampens the gong with their inner thighs while striking the open adjacent gongs. Dampen and let ring, thereby articulating the melodies and rhythms. The fact that gongs have nipples doesn't have to sexualize them. A bump in the road could be called a hump in the road. Camels have humps, so do whales and mountains. I had to explain my methodology to the audience and to the State Arts Council so that **they** wouldn't create a sense of obscenity. (Cellists straddle their

*D Simons, p. 11*

instrument, clarinetists put it in their mouths and perform tonguing phrases). The piece was premiered in 2009 and performed twice in Rockland County, NY. I'm considering it a success. I had a Balinese prince intone Hindu blessings preceding and transitioning into the piece, to create a context of the "Sacred space of Gongs".



## RESEARCH PROJECT

One of the interesting aspects of writing this paper is discovering all the different Gong Cultures out there, not just from the points of origination in South East Asia, but far beyond, even to new gong shapes in Iceland. Every avenue I entered contained doors that opened into Gong chambers unknown. That an International Gong Culture Festival was taking place as I was writing this rings a bell inside my head, if you'll excuse the orchestration. **I need to embark on a research expedition to map the Gong Cultures of the South China Seas.**

This is a huge project, and a fascinating one. I haven't found any evidence of a real comprehensive survey of Gong Culture. My next step is to investigate a Fullbright grant and start planning a video documentation project that will take me there.

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[http://simons-karrer.com/Gong\\_Humping\\_Ceremony\\_SoL\\_FOR.mp4](http://simons-karrer.com/Gong_Humping_Ceremony_SoL_FOR.mp4)