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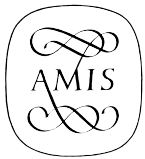

A Burmese Arched Harp (*Saùng-gauk*) And Its Pervasive Buddhist Symbolism

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A HOST OF SYMBOLIC MEANINGS attaches to every part of the *saùng-gauk*,[1] the Burmese arched harp. Many of the symbols have been explicitly linked to Buddhism by at least one source, and almost all of them show elements of Buddhist influence.[2] A large number of symbols date from the last two centuries, and a significant number of these relate to the epic *Rāmāyana,* Indian in origin, that entered Burma via Siam (Thailand) after the eighteenth-century war between these two countries. The decoration of the *saùng-gauk* in the Shrine to Music Museum in Vermillion, South Dakota (fig. 1)[3] includes a number of details that may be associated with various characters from the *jātaka* tales about the previous lives of the historical Buddha, Siddhārtha Gautama (ca. 563–ca. 483 B.C.).

Although there are scattered comments in the literature, particularly in the work of Muriel Williamson, who has done much of the research on this instrument, there has been no systematic study of the symbolism. In her account of the physical construction and decoration of one harp, Williamson does identify four Buddhist features, one of which is a decoration not found on the harp in the Shrine to Music Museum; but although she describes many other elements for which connections with Buddhist symbolism can be found, she does not identify these symbols in

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1. Terms of Burmese, a tonal language, are romanized according to John Okell, *A Guide to Romanization of Burmese* (London: Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, 1971), in which the grave accent (ˋ) marks the plain high tone and the acute accent (ˊ) marks the "creaky" high tone; the two low tones are not marked.

2. Buddhists and art historians find Buddhist symbolism in Burmese art and architecture. Alexander B. Griswold, in his monograph "Burma" from *The Art of Burma, Korea, Tibet,* rev. ed. (New York: Greystone Press, 1968), 34, writes: "The sikhara temple [in Pagan] is a vase containing a lotus. When U Lu Pe Win . . . first pointed out this symbolism to me, I must have seemed incredulous; so he showed me the proof—a bronze lotus with hinged petals, dug up in the ruins of Pagan."

3. Inventory no. 2375, Beede Fund.

FIGURE 1. *Saùng-gauk* in the Shrine to Music Museum, Vermillion, South Dakota. The gilded collar at the end of the neck is in nineteenth-century style, while the complement of sixteen strings suggests a date after 1960.

her work on construction, and her iconographical study of the arched harp considers the harp itself as a Buddhist symbol, not the symbols encoded in the construction and decoration of the instrument.[4]

In contrast with the approximately fifty traditional arched harps in use in Africa today,[5] there appear to be only four extant types of Asian harps,

4. Muriel Williamson, "The Construction and Decoration of One Burmese Harp," *Selected Reports in Ethnomusicology* 1 no. 2 (1968): 45–72 (the four symbols are the *Bo* leaf, the gilding of the *Bo* leaf, the explanation concerning the soundholes, and the rabbit with ruby eyes in the decoration); ibid., "The Iconography of Arched Harps in Burma," *Music and Tradition: Essays on Asian and Other Musics Presented to Laurence Picken*, ed. D. P. Widdess and R. F. Wolpert (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 209–21. Williamson studied with Daw May, a former student of the last court harpist, Deiwá-einda Ù Maung Maung Gyi (1855–1933). Her writings constitute the majority of published material about this instrument not in the Burmese language and script.

5. Sue Carole de Vale, "Prolegomena to a Study of Harp and Voice Sounds in Uganda: A Graphic System for the Notation of Texture," *Selected Reports in Ethnomusicology* 5 (1984):

all of them arched.[6] Two of these Asian harps are the *waj* of the Nuristani people in the Hindu Kush region of Afghanistan, and the recently rediscovered instrument of the Hindu Pardhans of India, the *bīṇ-bājā*, little known and unrecognized as a harp until 1984.[7] Both of these are played with a plectrum. The two remaining types of harps are Burmese; evidence from iconography and Chinese texts shows that the Burmese have had two types of harps from at least the eighth century on, one with and one without pegs.[8] Today Burma boasts the *t'na* (usually played by the Mon and Karen peoples on the border between Burma and Thailand[9]), which uses tuning pegs, and the *saùng-gauk*, which uses tuning cords; both are plucked with the right-hand fingers.

The association with Buddhism, the prevailing and unifying religion of Burma, has been an important factor in the *saùng-gauk*'s survival (in India, this instrument—the ancient *vīṇā*— disappeared at the time Buddhism vanished there[10]). Of the various ethnic groups who successively regrouped to form a united Burmese kingdom from as early as 1044 A.D., the one in a position of dominance was always Buddhist or was converted to Buddhism. From the reign of King Anawrahta (1044–77) until the fall of the kingdom in 1885, most of his successors regarded the promotion of

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285, citing Klaus P. Wachsmann, "Human Migration and African Harps," *Journal of the International Folk Music Council* 16 (1964): 84–88.

6. Two once-defunct angle-harp traditions have been revived. See "Changi," *The New Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments*, 3 vols., ed. Stanley Sadie (New York: New Grove's Dictionaries of Music Inc., 1984) 1:338; and Grace Wong, "The Western Harp in China: Report on a 1983 Solo Tour," *The American Harp Journal* 10 (Summer, 1985): 78–80.

7. The *waj* is described by Thomas Alvad, "The Kafir Harp," *Man* 54 (Oct., 1954): 26–29. Roderic Knight, in "The Harp in India Today," *Ethnomusicology* 29 (1985): 9–28, describes the *bīṇ-bājā* of the Gogia ethnic group.

8. Judith Becker, "The Migration of the Arched Harp from India to Burma," *Galpin Society Journal* 20 (1967): 21, provides and describes a line drawing of a Pyu harp from Old Prome (Śrī Kṣetra), dating from before 800 A.D. Two harps, one definitely with tuning pegs, that were presented by a thirty-five member delegation from the Pyu kingdom of Upper Burma to the T'ang court on New Year's day in 802 A.D. are described by D. C. Twitchett and A. H. Christie in "A Medieval Burmese Orchestra," *Asia Major*, n.s. 7 (1959): 179–95. The musicians may have been Mon.

9. Theodore Stern and Theodore A. Stern in " 'I Pluck my Harp': Musical Acculturation Among the Karen of Western Thailand," *Ethnomusicology* 15 (1971): 186–219, describe the *na den* of the Pwo Karen, an instrument derived from the Mon *t'na*.

10. Becker, "The Migration of the Arched Harp from India to Burma," 21, citing Claudie Marcel-Dubois, *Les Instruments de musique de l'Inde anciennes* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1941), 109–15. In the latter half of the eleventh century, Buddhism in India entered its closing phase; and by the thirteenth century it had almost entirely disappeared. (Indian Buddhists today are usually converts who became Buddhists in this century.)

the faith as a royal duty.[11] Members of the dominant group knew the harp or acquired it from the vanquished. Several of the kings, especially in the nineteenth century, were also harpists.[12]

Burma was probably the first area in Southeast Asia to receive Buddhism from India, possibly in the third century B.C.,[13] a time when the arched harp was still strongly associated with Buddhist rites. The earliest Burmese written references to the Burmese harp, although centuries later, link it to Buddhism: an inscription from a Buddhist temple dating from ca. 1090 A.D. uses the old Mon name for the harp, *tana,* in the phrase, "The Bodhisat was a player on the harp."[14] The earliest appearance of the old Burmese name for harp, *con,* is found in a temple built around 1125, in the inscription, "[They] test the Bodhisatta with harp and trumpet;"[15] and a Burmese inscription from 1199 A.D. includes the phrase "Buddhist monks who can play the harp."[16]

Three types of symbols recur in the *saùng-gauk* in the Shrine to Music Museum, two of them in both the structure and the ornamentation. The first is the *Bo* leaf, representing the tree under which Gautama Buddha sat during his Enlightenment: carved at the terminus of the neck and gilded in several locations on the membrane, it is, according to master harp player U Than Tun of Rangoon, the one symbol that is required on every *saùng-gauk.*[17]

11. Donald Eugene Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1965), 14. Burmese Buddhism experienced an extraordinary degree of royal promotion and the development of an ecclesiastical hierarchy, both dating from the eleventh century. Theravada Buddhism resulted from the second major schism of ca. 250 B.C.; Mahayana Buddhism, the other major branch of Buddhism today, dates from the first centuries A.D.

12. Williamson, "Saung-gauk," *The New Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments* 3:307.

13. The golden lands to which King Ashoka sent missionaries are most often identified as Burma, although Cambodia (now Kampuchea) is sometimes named.

14. Williamson, "The Iconography of Arched Harps in Burma," 221.

15. Ibid., 222. A Bodhisatta (Pali) or Bodhisattva (Sanskrit) formerly indicated an earlier incarnation of the historical Buddha and now designates an individual destined to become a Buddha in this or a later life.

16. Becker, "The Migration of the Arched Harp from India to Burma," 23. Although Becker discusses the depictions of the harp from the temples that according to Williamson have inscriptions, she states that this inscription is the earliest one in Burmese that mentions the harp. Perhaps she means that it is the first to use the Burmese term "saung." This inscription is not mentioned in Williamson's study of iconography, though the depictions of harps in the temple are described. These inscriptions are actually comparatively early, since the Burmese adopted the Mon script and began writing their language during the reign of King Anawrahta; the earliest inscription dates from 1058.

17. U Than Tun began studying with U Maung Glay of Prome (his father's eldest

Flowers of many kinds comprise the second type of symbol, notably flowers of three different cultures: the *tha-zin* flowers of the royal Burmese Buddhist court, found in one shape of the neck and in the decoration; the sinuous Siamese *yodaya* flowers found in the decoration; and the lotus flowers recognizable in the twelve-petalled flowers of the decoration. The lotus is a transformed pre-Aryan Indian symbol for the Mother goddess, and like the *Bo* leaf an early aniconic (imageless) Buddhist symbol.

The third recurring symbol is the monkey—the "monkey head" at the highest point of the stringbar and the "monkey-sitting" shape of the neck (the monkey is a key figure in the *Rāmāyana*).

The Burmese commit even the construction of harps to poetry: a traditional account of it in a poem by Myá-wadi Min-gyì Ù Sá (1766–1853), preserved in compressed notation in a small *parabaik* (palm-leaf manuscript), mentions six parts in order of construction:

[Use] the *Padauk* wood as a main base [for the harp bowl]
[Then attach] a curved arch of catechu [as a *let-yone*]
Cover [the harp bowl] above with a skin of stag
[And] thirteen strings of *Khin wa* [raw silk]
Tied to the stringbar
[Make] drooping tasseled tips like flowers at the ends of tails [cords]
With *du tay htan tya* [the string sounds]
What a sound!—that the country loves
Of that Harp, the product of the Royal Palace[18]

U Khin Zaw attributes the now standard complement of thirteen strings to Myá-wadi Min-gyì Ù Sá himself.[19]

An examination of these six parts and a seventh, the tuning-hoop (which, though it is not specified in his poem, may have been added by

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brother) in 1955, before the harp program was begun by the Ministry of Culture. I wish to thank him for generously providing information and permitting its publication. Unless otherwise noted, his statements were made during conversations on May 2, 1986, and June 16, 1987, in Rockville, Maryland.

18. Williamson, "A Supplement to the Construction and Decoration of One Burmese Harp," *Selected Reports in Ethnomusicology* 2 (1975): 113. The translator, U Tin Htway, added the parenthetical words.

19. U Khin Zaw, "Burmese Music (A Preliminary Enquiry)," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 10 no. 3 (London: University of London, 1941): 725. The *HRAF* (Human Relations Area Files) note that the first study of Burmese music, commissioned by the Burma Research Society in 1940, was U Khin Zaw's "Burmese Music A Preliminary Enquiry," *Journal of the Burma Research Society* 30 (1940): 387–466. (*HRAF Updates* [January, 1985] includes no entries that address Burmese music, not even Williamson's writings, nor do the *HRAF* bibliographies for Southeast Asia and Indochina.)

Myá-wadi Min-gyì Ù Sá[20]) reveals that the *saùng-gauk* is symbolically endowed in almost every aspect: the materials used, the location in which the material is found, the numbers and shapes of a given element of decoration, and the construction (including that of parts added during the last two hundred years). Even the playing and storing of the harp has symbolic aspects—before playing it, the harpist removes his or her slippers (the same action performed before entering a Buddhist temple); and when the harp is not being played, it is placed on an elevated stand.[21]

This study is limited to the symbols found in a single harp, a modern instrument traditionally and professionally made and decorated; where possible, U Than Tun confirmed the observations made here. While the information presented concerning the decoration of the harp pertains solely to the instrument in the Shrine to Music Museum, the descriptions of the symbolism involved in the construction of the seven parts (strings, tuning cords, stringbar, membrane, neck, soundbox, and tuning hoop), however, apply to all harps of this type.

The Decoration of the Harp in the Shrine to Music Museum

Sections of the harp in the Shrine to Music Museum have a thin covering of gold, the noncorroding metal that symbolizes life, light, immortality and truth.[22] Gilding a harp honors it, and a harp may be gilded with eighty leaflets, a lucky number for Buddhists.[23] The gilding on the harp in the Shrine to Music Museum includes a number of symbols. The gilded terminus of the neck is decorated with eight radiating spirals (fig. 7), perhaps for the Eightfold Path to Enlightenment. Eight is a lucky number, according to U Than Tun, who also states that the large sinuous curve in the gilding of the carved *Bo*-leaf (fig. 8) represents a flower stem rather than a snake, though snake symbolism is to be found elsewhere.

There is a (non-Vedic) saying in India, "One should never approach the

20. Williamson, "Construction," 51. In "A Biographical Note on Myá-wadi [Min-gyì] U Sá, Burmese Poet and Composer," *Musica asiatica* 2 (1979): 151–55, Williamson does not mention the harp. U Than Tun states that the poet did play the harp.

21. Williamson, "Construction," 52.

22. Heinrich Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*, ed. Joseph Campbell, Bollingen Series, 6 (Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1972), 212.

23. Williamson, "Construction," 54. U Than Tun reports that he has no knowledge of eighty as a lucky number.

presence of a divinity without the offering of a handful of flowers." The decoration of harp and stand includes flowers of five kinds. The upper edge of the soundbox is gilded in *ka-noke* style, modelled after the royal *thazin* flowers, and U Than Tun identifies the raised curves just below as Siamese-style flowers called *yodaya*,[24] which he says are commonly used in the decoration. The harp is decorated with three large flowers and six small flowers, each with a red stone of corresponding size at its center: the large flowers are on the soundbox at the bowl end (fig. 9) and at the base of the neck on either side (fig. 10); while of the six small flowers, four are on the tuning hoop (fig. 10), one is at the center of the *Bo* leaf on the neck (fig. 8), and one is found near the base of the neck in the decoration of the *sa-ga* end of the membrane (fig. 6, at the left). The gilded harp stand has two medium-sized flowers, each with nine inner petals and a red central stone.

The small flowers are formed from six outer pieces of glass and a central red piece for a total of seven, a lucky number for Buddhists,[25] and the total number of petals among them is thirty-six, a Buddhist sacred number.[26] The arrangement of six stones in a circle about a center could yield other interpretations: no fewer than six *jātaka* tales mention six colored rays emanating from the Buddha,[27] and in one myth, six trees bend in homage around the Buddha.

Each of the large flowers has twelve inner petals. As with the small flowers, the total number of inner petals among them is the sacred number thirty-six. The consistent use of a number that was both significant in ancient India and specifically associated with the lotus flower suggests that lotus flowers are intended here.[28] In pre-Vedic times, the lotus flower was exclusively the symbol of the Mother Goddess, who was associated with the creative and active color red;[29] perhaps this is the reason for the artists's choice of red glass. The lotus flower became associated with the Hindu god

24. Private communication, Dec. 22, 1986, Rockville, Md.

25. T. W. Rhys Davids, *Buddhist Birth Stories (Jataka Tales)*, rev. ed. (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1925), 159.

26. Ibid., 163.

27. The *jātaka* tales are nos. 4, 87, 148, 320, 514, and 536 in E. B. Cowell, ed., *The Jataka or Stories of the Buddha's Former Births*, 6 vols. (London: Luzac and Co. Ltd., 1969). Other *jātaka* tales mention light (uncolored) or dark blue rays emanating from the head and body of the Buddha.

28. John W. Spellman, "The Symbolic Significance of the Number Twelve in Ancient India," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 22 (1962): 87, citing the sacred Sanskrit treatise, Agni Purāṇa.

29. Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*, 203.

Viṣṇu and the Buddha, and Reginald LeMay calls it "perhaps the purest symbol of Buddhism."[30]

The arrangement of the six small flowers seems to emphasize the *Bo*-leaf shape of the terminus of the neck, recalling the veneration of the *Bo* tree (the sacred *bodhi* tree under which the Buddha received enlightenment). The *Bo*-leaf became a symbol of Buddhism at a very early date; it is found in Buddhist art in the second century B.C., before the earliest representations of the Buddha in human form in the first century A.D. In early Buddhist iconography, the veneration of the *Bo* tree by snakes (or their equivalent, elephants) is often depicted. In Buddhism, tree veneration was transformed into reverence for the trees under which the Buddha—and the Buddha's predecessor incarnations—gained enlightenment. Since the Enlightenment, sacred trees have been associated specifically with the idea of Buddhahood.[31] U Than Tun, who identified three gilded decorations on the membrane as *Bo*-leaf shaped, indicated that these three gilded *Bo* leaves must be present on the membrane of all harps;[32] and a brief survey of the harps photographed in the literature bears out this statement.

Strings and Tuning Cords

Both the designations and the material of the strings of the *saùng-gauk* hold symbolic meanings. Although harp strings, particularly those of African arched harps[33] and of the *bīṇ-bājā*[34] are sometimes symbolically named, the strings of the modern *saùng-gauk* are not. However, pitches in Burmese music are given names that carry symbolic meaning, and pitches on different instruments bear different names. On the harp, pitches are named for the animals believed to produce those pitches: bull, horse, peacock, goat, crane, cuckoo and elephant.[35] U Khin Zaw does not state unequivocally

30. Reginald LeMay, *A Concise History of Buddhist Art in Siam,* 2d ed. (Rutland, Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1963), 74.

31. Zimmer, *The Art of Indian Asia: Its Mythology and Transformations,* 2 vols., completed and edited by Joseph Campbell, Bollingen Series, 39 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1960), 60. The historical Buddha was, in early Buddhist times, regarded as the seventh incarnation (numerological meaning unknown) and later the twenty-fourth incarnation. The *jātaka* tales present some 550 incarnations.

32. Private communication, Dec. 22, 1986, Rockville, Md. He believes that most of the decoration is freely chosen by the artist to beautify the harp and need not embody conscious symbolism.

33. De Vale, "Harps, African" *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* 8:215.

34. Knight, "The Harp in India Today," 21.

35. U Khin Zaw, "Burmese Music (A Preliminary Enquiry)," 719, citing U San Win, *Bur-*

that these seven names correspond to the complement of seven strings commonly used on the *saùng-gauk* before the late eighteenth century; in fact, he believes that the seven-stringed instrument may have played pentatonic music.[36]

A string is attached at the lower end by passing it through one of the holes drilled through the stringbar and then twisting it around itself seven times. This is the method U Than Tun was taught by his teacher; both he and Rhys Davids note that seven is a Buddhist lucky number.

The strings are traditionally made of the raw silk associated with many East Asian instruments, particularly those originating in China where the word *szŭ-chu* ('silk and bamboo') meant "music," specifically a stringed instrument.[37] The use of a material originating in China for an instrument that may be of Indian origin has not received attention in the available sources; neither Williamson nor Becker considers this anomaly, though each argues for Indian derivation. The Buddhist Pyus used silk-cotton, a material that did not require the taking of life, rather than true silk; but the available Chinese documents do not indicate whether harp strings can be made from silk-cotton thread or whether the Pyus used silk strings.[38] Although sericulture spread to India around 360 A.D., the contemporary *bīṇ-bājā* uses strings made of cow or deer veins, not silk.[39] The early interaction of India and China that began around 200 B.C. was complex, and the melding of the two cultures occurred on neutral territory—on the overland trade route between China and India by way of Upper Burma, for example. Both silk and Buddhism travelled eastward on the "Silk Road"; but whether or not the arched harp migrated from India, and if so, whether or not it arrived in Burma with silk strings, remain hotly disputed points.

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mese Music Notes, bk. 2. According to his source (U San Win), the approximate Western pitch names are: C, elephant; D, horse; E, goat; G, bull; A, peacock; F, cuckoo; and B, crane. The name of the first string broken in Guttila's competition is called the "bee string," but the instrument in the Pali canon is the seven-stringed lute, not the harp. The gaps between E and G (F, cuckoo) and between A and C (B, crane) were filled in to form a heptatonic scale; according to Rev. Spence Hardy's analysis in Rhys Davids' *Buddhist Birth Stories (Jataka Tales)*, the Bodhisattva did not take the form of crane or cuckoo, while at least one incarnation did take the form of each of the others (if a goatherd may be substituted for a goat).

36. Ibid., 725.

37. Gen'ichi Tsuge, "Bamboo, Silk, Dragon and Phoenix: Symbolism in Musical Instruments of Asia," *The World of Music* 20 (1978): 16.

38. U Htin Aung, *A History of Burma* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 11–12.

39. Knight, "The Harp in India Today," 21.

The tuning cords constitute a very ancient device that predates the invention of tuning pegs (first used around 1500 B.C.) by over a millenium.[40] On the *saùng-gauk*, the tuning cords are made from fine red cotton thread, traditionally hand-twisted into a three-ply cord.[41] The silk string is twisted within the cord, and the cord itself is twisted around the neck three times (figs. 2 and 3). Though the triple wrapping of a red three-ply cord, like the triple layer of red lacquer on the membrane, invites speculation about potential numerological meaning, U Than Tun attributes no significance to it beyond that of practicality. (The tuning cords of the Hindu *bīṇ-bājā*, made from twisted cow tail hair, are tied in exactly the same manner, but a stone relief from the first or second century A.D. depicting an instrument similar to the *bīṇ-bājā* clearly indicates one fewer clockwise turns around the neck.[42])

The tassel decorating the end of each free-hanging tuning cord (fig. 2) represents a flower; according to Twitchett and Christie, several instruments of the Pyu embassy from Upper Burma to the T'ang court in 801–802 A.D. were decorated with cords and "buds" or "knots" made from colored cotton cloth.[43] Neither Williamson nor U Than Tun identify the flower type of the tassel, though the latter does note that the tassels are red or brown like the membrane, or gold.

The Stringbar and Membrane

The stringbar for the *saùng-gauk*, the *hmin yo* or *khin dan*[44] (the latter translated by U Than Tun as "stringbar"[45]), is attached to the extreme ends of the soundbox under the membrane, and is decorated at both ends

40. F. W. Galpin, "The Sumerian Harp of Ur, c. 3500 B.C.," *Music and Letters* 10 (1929): 112. According to Ann Griffiths *et al.*, "Harp," *New Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments* 2:133, the Sumerian harp of Ur dates from ca. 2500 B.C.; there is iconographical evidence from 300 years earlier, ca. 2800 B.C.

41. Williamson, "Supplement," second note, 115, describes how she unraveled one cord and discovered the third ply.

42. Knight, "The Harp in India Today," 21. He cites Richard Widdess, "The Arched Harp in India and Burma: A Migration Theory Reconsidered," unpublished paper for the Music in India Symposium, School of Oriental and African Studies, London, 1982.

43. Twitchett and Christie, "A Medieval Burmese Orchestra," 185. See also Laurence Picken, "Instruments in an Orchestra from Pyu (Upper Burma) in 802," *Musica Asiatica* 4 (1984): 245–70.

44. Williamson, "Supplement," 112.

45. Private communication, Dec. 22, 1986, Rockville, Md. "String holder" is the name recommended as standard harp terminology by Sue Carol de Vale.

FIGURE 2. Tuning cords with tasseled ends shaped like flowers.

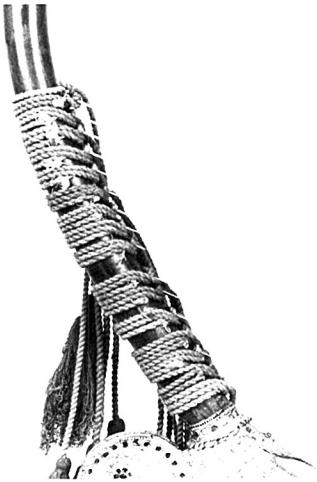

FIGURE 3. Tuning cords, each wrapped three times around the neck.

where it pierces the membrane; the visible section of the stringbar is shown in fig. 4. Because the stringbar transmits the vibrations of the strings to the resonating membrane, it is acoustically the single most important part of an arched harp.[46] Despite its importance, however, it has but one symbolic aspect: the top of the arch in the stringbar produces a lump in the membrane called the "monkey head"; U Than Tun states that this portion of the harp resembles a monkey's face, with the lump as the nose. The complete profile can be seen in fig. 5. Perhaps it is because the purpose of this lump is so obvious that no writer discusses it; I believe that it protects the end of the stringbar. The earliest depiction of a Burmese harp with a clearly visible stringbar and a lump similar to the modern monkey head dates from around 1090 A.D.[47]

46. Bo Lawergren, "Acoustics and Evolution of Arched Harps," *Galpin Society Journal* 34 (1981): 126.

47. Williamson, "The Iconography of Arched Harps in Burma," 220. Because of this, Williamson believes that the harp depicted is directly linked to the modern *saùng-gauk*.

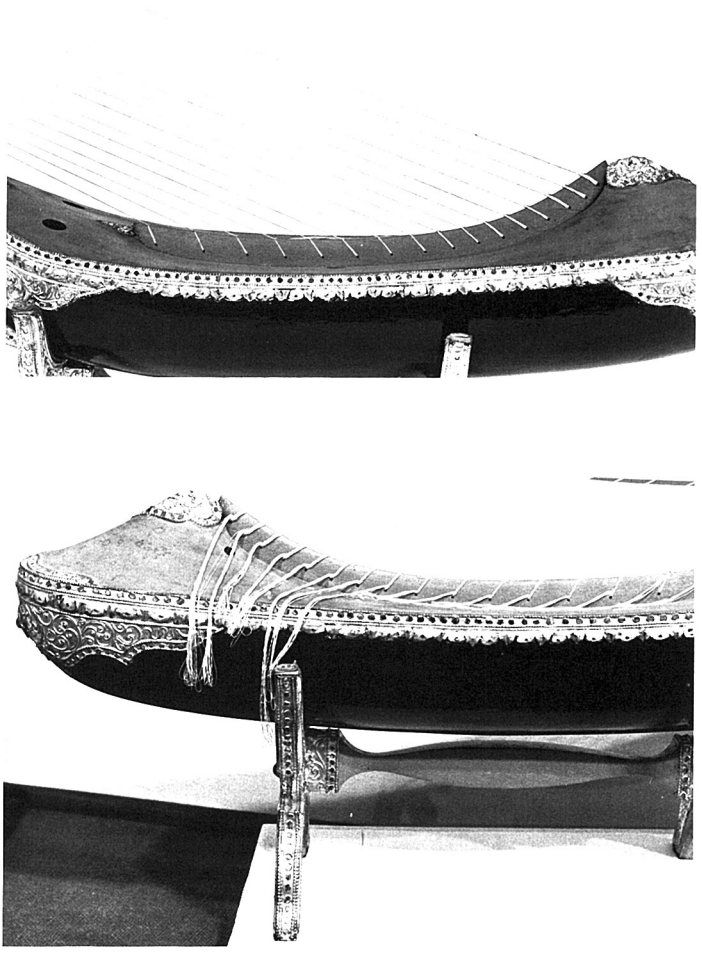

FIGURE 5. Profile of the monkey head with its nose at the hump.

Although no source directly attributes any symbolic meaning to the monkey head, the monkey itself is associated with Buddhism in several ways. In the *jātakas* of the Pali canon the monkey is the animal form most commonly taken by the Bodhisattva.[48] The introduction of Buddhism to China is recounted in the Monkey Sun myth, in which a Chinese monk is supplanted by his monkey companion, who is deified.[49] The monkey is a prominent figure in the *Rāmāyana*, an ancient Indian epic adapted by Indianized cultures throughout Indochina. There is also a link between the *Rāmāyana* characters and Buddhism: the Rāma of *Rāmāyana* is the seventh avatar or incarnation of Viṣṇu, regarded as a protector of the Buddha.

The meeting of Rāma and the King of the Monkeys—and the story in general—is much more dramatic in the Siamese than in the Indian version.[50] Around 1789 a royal commission to translate and adapt the Siamese *Rāmāyana* for the Burmese court was given to the poet Myá-wadi Min-gyì Ù Sá, to whom certain innovations regarding the *saùng-gauk* are attributed (see p. 43). It was he who first used the *Shà* root (which sometimes has the "monkey-sitting" shape) for the neck, thus increasing the curve in the stringbar and making the monkey head much more prominent[51]—one argument for an unspoken derivation of monkey symbolism from the *Rāmāyana*.

During the decoration of the harp, the stringbar and vibrating membrane are lacquered red, traditionally in three coats; it is tempting to speculate that this number corresponds to the "Triple Jewel" or "Threefold Refuge" of Buddhist doctrine.[52] The significance of the red coloring remains unknown; however, the fragments of an eighth-century Chinese harp

48. Rev. Spence Hardy, "The Bodisats," table 7, in Rhys Davids, *Buddhist Birth Stories (Jataka Tales)*, 246.

49. E. T. C. Werner, *A Dictionary of Chinese Mythology* (Shanghai, 1932; New York: The Julian Press, Inc., 1961), 462–68. Keith G. Stevens, "The Pilgrimage of the Chinese Buddhist Monk Hsüan Tsang," *Arts of Asia* 12 no. 3 (1982): 85–89, provides an excellent summary of the myth, photographs of the iconography of the monkey and the monk's other companions at the Temple of Sun Moon Lake, Taiwan, and modern manifestations of the myth in popular religion and art.

50. U Htin Aung, *Burmese Drama: A Study, with Translations, of Burmese Plays* (Calcutta, Oxford University Press, 1957), 32.

51. Williamson, "A Biographical note on Myá-wadi [Min-gyì] Ù Sá, Burmese Poet and Composer," 152.

52. Williamson, "Construction," 53, does not attribute any significance to the fact that her harp was given the Buddhist lucky number of seven coats of lacquer. The *Tripitaka* or triple jewel, also known as triple crown or three baskets, consists of the Buddha, the *dharma* (rules of the community) and the *sangha* (members of the community).

older than those presented by the Pyu delegation had red silk strings;[53] and paintings of Chinese harps dating after the T'ang dynasty (618–906) show the instruments painted red.[54] The most significant find relative to this is the angle harp excavated in 1948–49 from the Siberian archeological site Pazyryk II that dates from the fifth or fourth century B.C., the only stringed instrument from the site. It has a membrane of "thin, finely dressed leather, dyed red on the outside";[55] it may be useful to recall in this connection the association of the color red with the pre-Vedic Mother Goddess.

The membrane of deerskin, variously described as hide from a stag, a doe, or a virgin doe,[56] has no symbolism explicitly attributed to it in the sources. U Than Tun also attributes no symbolic meaning to it, or to the gender of the deer; he does note that deerskin is the strongest and longest-lasting hide available to the maker, and produces a sounding membrane that should last seventy-five years. The hide from the stomach area, the most flexible and elastic, is ideal.

In Siam the deer was an early symbol of the Buddha for the Mon peoples, some of whom migrated to Burma.[57] In the *jātakas* of the Pali canon, the Bodhisattva takes the form of a deer eleven times, a number second only to that of the monkey, the most frequent animal form.[58] Since the *Rā-*

53. Tracy E. H. Schwartz, "The Harps of East Asia," *Folk Harp Journal* 5 (June, 1974):7. The fragments are now housed in the Shōsōin Imperial Repository at Nara, Japan. A photograph of the reconstruction is found in Griffiths et al., "Harp," *The New Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments* 2:158, fig. 30.

54. Schwartz, 13. Schwartz warns that although the paintings probably show contemporary instruments, information derived from them must be used very circumspectly.

55. Ibid., 26.

56. Williamson, "Construction," 49–50, does not include the poet Myá-wadi Min-gyì Ù Sá, who calls for skin of stag in his poem, in her tally. Her anecdote concerning the extreme inauspiciousness of covering the *saùng-gauk* with a woman's garment provides a second gender association. Williamson attributes the injunction to the sacred status of the harp. It is permissible to place a man's *longyi* (a skirt-like garment worn by both men and women) over the harp, and in fact the episode concludes with this action.

Stern and Stern, in " 'I Pluck My Harp': Musical Acculturation Among the Karen of Western Thailand," 210, state that the modern *t'na* uses galvanized steel for the vibrating membrane. There is not yet a consensus concerning the relationship between the contemporary *t'na* and the ancient Mon *tana*.

57. Le May, *A Concise History of Buddhist Art in Siam*, 26. The deer was used in Mon art from the fifth to the tenth centuries; after the Khmer came to control central Siam in the tenth century, deer symbolism was not continued, although the Khmer adopted the Buddhist religion and other Buddhist symbols such as the lotus throne and the wheel.

58. Rev. Spence Hardy, "The Bodisats," table 7, from Rhys Davids, *Buddhist Birth Stories (Jataka Tales)*, 246.

māyana also includes a deer, there is a connection between material and shape, deer and monkey. The Burmese account the head the most sacred part of the body, and the many harps on which the deerskin-covered monkey head is decorated with a *Bo* leaf have thus a particularly potent conjunction of three important symbols.

The membrane is traditionally pierced by four soundholes, the fourth one comparatively small (it is on the right, close to the monkey head in fig. 6). The cutting of these holes incorporates three belief systems: Buddhism, Burmese pre-Buddhist animism, and the astrology of Brahmanism that has been employed by the Burmese since the time of the ancient Pyu kingdom of Lower Burma.[59] (Astrology became so popular that it was accepted—reluctantly—by Buddhism.) Although the number of holes corresponds to the number of Noble Truths of Buddhist doctrine,[60] the Burmese offer a different association with Buddhism.

The Guttila *jātaka* (number 243) recounts the Buddha's previous existence as Guttila, a musician in a royal court, who in the Pali canon plays a seven-stringed lute and in the Burmese version, an arched harp.[61] Guttila defeated a competitor by playing "so divinely" that four tiny *nat* daughters burst through the membrane and formed the four soundholes. The soundholes are cut during a ceremony called a *nat pwe* that honors the *nats* (animistic spirits) and invites them to reside in the harp.[62] The timing of this ceremony is sometimes determined by an astrologer who can select the most propitious moment. During the ceremony, a scroll with mystical signs is sometimes placed inside the harp.

According to the legend, the spirits are *nat* daughters—female. However, U Than Tun identifies the three large holes as entrances for the snake (fig. 6, lower right), the male dancer *Mintha* (upper left), and the female dancer *Mintha-mi* (lower left).

59. U Htin Aung, *A History of Burma*, 16, citing unspecified Chinese chronicles.

60. The four Truths are: (1) existence is suffering, (2) the origin of suffering is found in doomed desires, (3) the extinction of suffering results only from the extinction of desire, (4) the Path from suffering is the Noble Eightfold Path. The Eightfold Path is: right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right mode of living, right endeavor, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

61. Williamson, "Construction," 51, citing Cowell, *The Jataka or Stories of the Buddha's Former Births*, bk. 2. Cowell's translation uses the word "lute." U Khin Zaw, "Burmese Music (A Preliminary Enquiry)," 722, notes that Fox Strangways calls the instrument a *vīṇā*, a name of the arched harp in India but never in Burma.

62. Williamson, "Construction," 51. In "The Iconography of Arched Harps in Burma," 215, she identifies the plaque at West Hpetleik Guttila, of ca. 1070 A.D., as a depiction of this story, but she neither mentions the soundholes nor includes them in fig. 4, her line drawings of the scene.

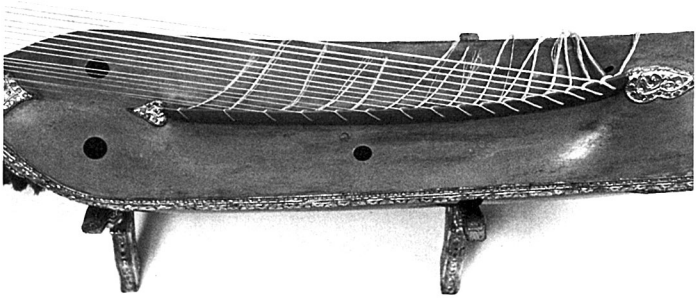

FIGURE 6. The membrane, with four soundholes. The three required *Bo* leaves are present, at the two ends of the stringbar and the *sa-ga* end (left) of the soundbox, which is also decorated with a small six-petalled flower.

Nāgas (snakes) played an important role in Hindu and in the earliest Buddhist iconography as guardians of doors,[63] and Mintha is a male artist and Mintha-mi a female artist in a *zat-pwè* or Burmese classical drama that draws on *jātakas* and other Buddhist lore (U Khin Zaw specifically notes the elements of the *Rāmāyana* in it).[64] U Than Tun attaches no special significance to the snake and cannot say whether or not it is the cobra. The fourth hole on his harp is extremely small; he does not rule out the possibility of its use by spirits,[65] but states that it should not be considered an eye in the monkey face formed by the membrane and stringbar.

The Neck

The feature that immediately identifies the *saùng-gauk* is the long, elegant, incurving arch of the neck, the graceful line of its lower half pre-

63. Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*, 63. *Nāgas* also guarded the riches of the deep seas, including pearls.

64. David Morton, in U Khin Zaw, "A Folk-Song Collector's Letter from Shwebo," *Selected Reports in Ethnomusicology* 2 no. 2 (1975): 170, note 11.

65. Private communication, Dec. 22, 1986, Rockville, Md.

served by using tuning cords rather than pegs. The neck, the upper half of which is not structurally required, is carved from the naturally curved root of the *Shà* tree (*Acacia catechu*); before the nineteenth century, the stemwood of *po me-za-tha* or *po me-thu-za tha* was used.[66] To acquire the proper shape, the root must grow in a riverine location or on a hillside or hilltop; certain hills are held sacred and believed to be inhabited by the *nats*.[67]

Of the different shapes a tree root can assume, only the "monkey-sitting" (*myauk htaing*), "orchid-spray" (*tha-zin kway*), and "fishing-hook" shapes of the *Shà* root are used for the neck.[68] These shapes seem to have been the only ones used from the beginning.[69] No source attributes meaning specifically to the monkey-sitting shape (though the stringbar incorporates other forms of monkey symbolism); according to U Than Tun, the curve resembles the upper back of the sitting monkey, not its derrière. The orchid-spray shape was inspired by the *tha-zin* flowers that belonged solely to the king; these flowers, also found in the style of decoration called *kanoke*, grew wild in the jungle and were collected and brought with great ceremony to the Royal Palace, where they were worn by royalty.[70] The fishing-hook shape has the greatest curve, while the orchid-spray has the least, a gentle and beautiful curve.

The part of the neck below the "elbow" is known as *let-yone*, part of the expression "right-hand man" which signifies strength and importance.[71] The terminus of the neck (*nyaung ywet*), shown from the side in fig. 7 and from the front in fig. 8, flares out to form the shape of a *Bo* leaf. Although decorating the *Bo* leaf itself may formerly have paid homage to the Buddha, today the natural, ungilded arch showing the eye of the root is preferred.[72]

The earliest use of the *Bo*-leaf shape for the harp has not yet been determined. Both arched harps sent by the Pyu embassy from Upper Burma to

66. Williamson, "Construction," 48, 55, citing a *parabaik* in the possession of Daw May, 1960.

67. Ibid., 47–48.

68. Ibid., 59. The monkey-sitting and orchid-spray shapes were identified by U Maung Maung Tin, who had access to an old *parabaik*, and by U Hmat Gyi.

69. Williamson, "The Iconography of Arched Harps in Burma," 211–12, identifies each neck as either monkey-sitting or orchid-spray shaped. ("Monkey sitting" was translated for her as "monkey seat.")

70. Williamson, "Construction," 54. Her source is a personal communication from Shwepyi U Ba Tin, Mandalay, 1962.

71. Ibid., 62. The right hand is important in Buddhist iconography; it is used for significant gestures of the Buddha.

72. Ibid., 48.

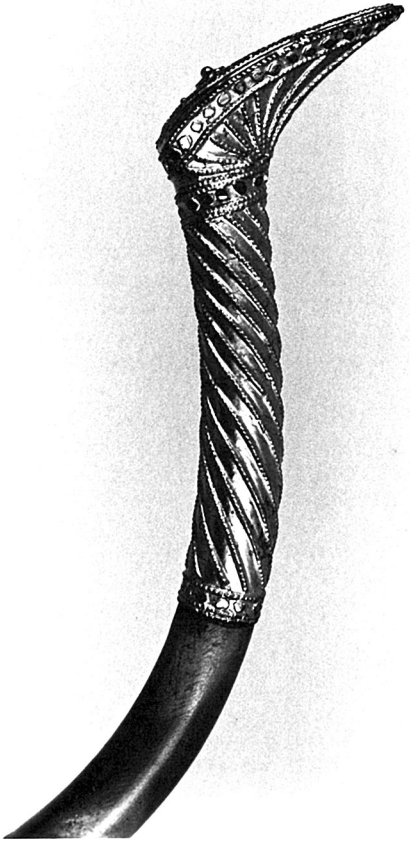

FIGURE 7. Side view of the neck. The gilded collar has eight radiating spirals.

FIGURE 8. Front view of the *Bo*-leaf terminus, decorated with a flower (formed from seven pieces of glass) with a sinuous stem.

the T'ang court in 801–802 A.D. had phoenix heads,[73] not *Bo* leaves. (Becker believes that traces of the bird-headed harp can perhaps be found "in the upward thrusting apex of the contemporary harp.")[74] All the carvings described by Williamson, dating from the mid-seventh century A.D., show plainer ends of the arch that can be described as scrolls. The earliest harp identified as having a terminus unequivocally shaped like a *Bo* leaf dates from the early to mid nineteenth century,[75] just prior to what is presumably the earliest date for the use of the *Shà* root. However, Williamson offers an alternate interpretation of one harp depicted in a scene in Lokahteikpan Temi (1113–55 A.D.) in which she says that the terminus may be shaped like a *Bo* leaf.[76]

According to U Than Tun, it is considered unlucky to break the neck of the harp. If the break occurs above the strings, the parts can be glued and the break covered, with a ribbon, for example; but if the break is lower, the neck must be replaced and at least some of the gilding removed and replaced in the process.

Soundbox and Tuning Hoop

While the Burmese are said to describe the soundbox as a bowl or house and firmly reject the idea that it is shaped like a boat,[77] U Than Tun did describe it as a boat and specifically drew attention to its similarity to Egyptian harps. The term "house" is descriptive as well as symbolic: it can be the residence of spirits. As we have seen, during the construction of the harp, a ceremony may be held to invite *nat* spirits to reside within the harp and "enliven its tunes."[78] According to U Than Tun, the spirits are believed to leave the harp through the soundholes while it is being played, and to return afterwards.

The Burmese call the wide end of the soundbox (fig. 9), which customarily has at least its rim gilded, "the cup" after a ceremonial silver or gold bowl or cup of the Buddhist court; the narrow end is called *sa-ga* after the leaf of the *Sa-ga* tree, a tree planted for its beauty that grows to a height of some fifteen feet and has white, jasmine-shaped flowers with a very sweet

73. Twitchett and Christie, 186.
74. Becker, 21.
75. Williamson, "The Iconography of Arched Harps in Burma," 224.
76. Ibid., 222.
77. Williamson, "Construction," 48.
78. Ibid., 51.

FIGURE 9. The cup end of the soundbox, decorated with Indian, Burmese, and Siamese flowers: a twelve-petalled (Indian) lotus flower with a red glass center; the Burmese *ka-noke* style decoration at the upper edge modelled after the royal *tha-zin* flower; and the curling tendrils of the Siamese *yodaya* style.

scent. Even sections of the resonator that cannot be seen after construction are symbolically named. The thick floor of the resonator is called the *kyaw yoh* or backbone (though no source suggests that the soundbox represents a vertebrate). The sides of the harp are graduated from a great thickness at the floor to the razor-thin lip of the resonator (*hnote hkan*).[79]

The final structural component of the harp is traditionally called either *sa-hto* (hairpin) or *pa-byin* (cobra hood); Williamson designates it the "tuning hoop" because some harpists grip it with the knee while tuning (fig. 10).[80] It probably originated during the Kònbaung Dynasty (1752–1855),

79. Ibid., 48. Only one of her sources identified the *sa-ga* symbol, and she does not comment on the significance of the *Sa-ga* tree. She corrected the transliteration of the Burmese term *hnote hkan* in "Supplement," 115.

80. Ibid., 50. In "Supplement," 113, she notes that her term provoked controversy among Burmese readers because not all harpists use it to tune. The term is retained because the other two terms each imply a specific form of symbolism.

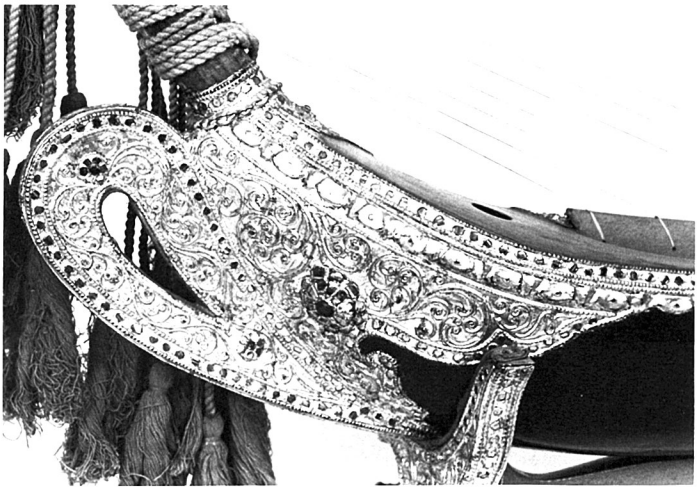

FIGURE 10. The *sa-hto* (court hairpin) or *pa-byin* (cobra hood), called in English the tuning hoop, decorated on each side with two small six-petalled flowers.

possibly during the first quarter of the nineteenth century.[81] Although a relatively late and purely Burmese addition not found on Indian or Mesopotamian harps, it is rich in symbolic meaning. The tuning hoop is traditionally carved from the hardwood *tha-byay*, a venerated species of tree still used in the propitiation of *nats* and the Buddha (the leaves of the tree were also worn in the earlobes and in the hair by Burmese soldiers entering battle, to ensure victory).[82]

The term *sa-hto* refers to the single-pronged hairpin with jewelled knob that was formerly used at the royal court; the shapes of hairpin and tuning hoop are similar.[83] The Mandalay harpmaker U Hmat Kyee accepts this first name and dismisses the term *pa-byin* (cobra hood) as bazaar slang.[84]

81. Williamson, "Construction," 51. The sources are a communication with harpmaker U Hmat Gyi and old unpublished *parabaik*.

82. Ibid., 50–51.

83. Ibid., 51.

84. Williamson, "Supplement," 113, says that authorities in Rangoon probably would not agree with him and suggests a regional difference.

None of Williamson's sources allude to the symbolic role of the cobra: in Indian mythology, the cobra protects both the Buddha and Viṣṇu;[85] as in the case of the *Bo* tree, *nāgas* (snakes), once accepted into the mythology, thereafter protect divinities. Although the legend is an old one in India, the Buddha-figure incorporating the cobra is not found there.[86] However, the cobra hood did become a popular symbol in Southeast Asia. Kyanzittha, second successor to King Anawrahta, built the Nagayōn temple on the site where, when fleeing Anawrahta's wrath, he had been protected while sleeping under a cobra hood: in this temple, the harp-playing King Atula of the *Nāgas* is depicted paying homage in two carvings representing two different incarnations of the Buddha.[87]

* * *

In addition to the three recurrent symbols of *Bo* leaf, flowers and monkey, there are two general classes of recurring symbols: those of the royal court, and those from the *Rāmāyana*.

The royal Burmese Buddhist court is represented in *tha-zin* flowers, *ka-note* style of decoration, and the shapes of the ceremonial court cup and the *sa-hto* or court hairpin. The *tha-zin* flower shape is found in one style of neck and in the *ka-note* decoration along the top edge of the resonating body. The wide end of the resonator is shaped like the court cup, and the tuning hoop has the shape of the hairpin worn at the court.

The symbols that are probably linked to the *Rāmāyana* are the sound-hole entrances for Mintha and Mintha-mi (two characters of the *zat-pwè*, a drama derived from the *Rāmāyana* and a related *jātaka*), the monkey-sitting style of the new kind of neck made of *Shà* root (a feature that appeared shortly after the *Rāmāyana* was introduced to the Burmese court from Siam), and the monkey head, made more prominent by the new kind of neck made of *Shà* root.

The types of symbolism used in the construction and decoration of the *saùng-gauk* can be classified according to Gen'ichi Tsuge's categories for symbolism in musical instruments:[88]

85. Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*, 59–69.

86. Zimmer, *The Art of Indian Asia: Its Mythology and Transformations*, 66.

87. Williamson, "The Iconography of Arched Harps in Burma," 218, citing *Glass Palace Chronicle of the Kings of Burma*, trans. by Pe Maung Tin and G. H. Luce (Rangoon, 1960), 108.

88. Tsuge, "Bamboo, Silk, Dragon and Phoenix: Symbolism in Musical Instruments of Asia," 13.

1. Shape and Name
   a. *Bo* leaf on the terminus of the neck and in the decoration
   b. Orchid spray (*tha-zin*, royal flower) shape of neck and style of decoration
   c. Monkey-sitting shape of neck
   d. Fishing-hook shape of neck
   e. Monkey head or monkey face formed by the stringbar
   f. Ceremonial court-cup shape for end of soundbox
   g. *Sa-ga* leaf at end of soundbox
   h. *Sa-hto* (court hairpin) name and shape for tuning hoop
   i. *Pa-byin* (cobra head) name and shape for tuning hoop
   j. *Hnote hkan* (cup lip) of the soundbox
   k. *Let-yone* section of neck, associated with strength and importance
   l. Flower shape of tassels
   m. Gilded flowers in decoration in the style of a lotus (?) flower
2. Materials from which the instrument is made
   a. Venerated wood used for the tuning hoop
   b. Sacred location where *Shà* tree root is found, used for the neck of some harps
   c. Silk for strings, associated with music
   d. Red lacquer, possibly a very ancient symbol of divinity
   e. Deerskin, possibly from the Mon Buddhist symbol for the Buddha
   f. Gold in decoration, symbol of light, immortality, truth
3. The function of the instrument
   a. Housing for *nat* spirits in the body of the harp
   b. Soundholes regarded as entrances for the spirits
   c. Snake said to guard the soundhole entrance
4. Duality symbolism
   a. Stag or doe skin specified for membrane, possibly a gender symbol
   b. Restrictions on appropriate harp coverings, possibly a gender symbol
5. Numerological symbolism
   a. Three: Three coats of lacquer, the three-ply cord wrapped three times around the neck, possibly symbols for the Threefold Refuge
   b. Four: Four soundholes for four *nat* daughters
   c. Six: Six flowers, each of six outer pedals, in the decoration, possibly for the six trees bowing in homage, or for the six rays emanating from the Buddha
   d. Seven: A Buddhist lucky number; seven pieces of glass used in the small flowers in the decoration
   e. Eight: A Buddhist lucky number; eight spiral rings in the decoration on the collar of the neck, possibly for the Eightfold Path
   f. Twelve: Large twelve-petal lotus-style (?) flowers in the decoration
   g. Thirty-six: Sacred number, thirty-six small petals and thirty-six large

inner petals in the decoration of the Shrine to Music Museum's harp

h. Eighty: Number of gold leaflets known in one case to have been applied to a harp

Since Buddhism does not feature dualism, the scarcity of duality symbolism is not unexpected. But the abundance and variety of the entries in other categories emphasizes the ability of the *saùng-gauk*, like Buddhism itself, to acquire and use new symbols over many centuries.

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