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THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MODERN BURMESE HSAING ENSEMBLE

by
Robert Garifas

Burmese music is certainly one of the least known of all the various musics of Asia. Available recordings of the music of this Southeast Asian republic have not been generally available outside Burma to scholars nor to the general public in satisfactory scope or quantity. Few scholars have had either the opportunity or perhaps the interest to study Burmese music. All of this has resulted in very little information about Burmese music being available for consideration. Being one of the few individuals who has had the opportunity of studying music in Burma, I should like to add that even after having entered Burma for an extended period of time, the difficulties encountered in studying this music continue to be numerous.

There are painfully few early written sources in Burmese which deal with Burmese music. A very large proportion of all the writings in the Burmese language are devoted to Buddhism or to poetry, with a good number of court histories and annals counting into that number. There may have existed works which described the theory or performance of Burmese music, but because of the extremes in the Burmese climate, many of the Burmese books, all written on palm leaves, deteriorated completely and it is therefore today impossible to know just how much may have been lost to the natural effects of the passing of time.

Some small bits of the past of Burmese music may be pieced together from a great variety of different sources; the historical writings which have survived, descriptions of Burma by early visitors, the surviving song texts and the manner of their evolution in the standard editions, parallels which can be noted between certain practices in Burma and in what we know of ancient India, and more recently, what can be gleaned from the evidence after the beginning of this century in photographs and, very recently, on recordings. Put together, these resources are far from entirely satisfactory for purposes of attempting to trace the unique characteristics of Burmese music. Nonetheless, it is possible to suggest that certain patterns of development may have taken place by imaginative, if not somewhat outrageous interpretation of these varied types of evidence.

When we speak of Burmese music today, it is usually understood that we make reference to the Burmese proper, that is to say, those Burmese speaking inhabitants of great lowlands of central and south Burma and not including the various but

significant minority groups also residing in the country, such as the Mon, Shan, Kachin, Chin, Karen, etc. For long periods of Burmese history, political control of large sections of the country was in the hands of first the Pyu, then the Mon or the Shan. It is probable that these groups may well have exerted considerable cultural influence on the Burmese tradition. The most overt manifestations of this influence on the Burmese tradition today appear in the inclusion of a group of Mon, or Talaing songs in the Mahagita, the great compendium of songs of the days of the royal courts of Burma, and the inclusion of certain Shan elements in the music of the Nat spirit possession ceremonies.

It is evident that the tradition of music in Burma is a part of the broad family of music traditions which include the musics of Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Southern Philippines. Yet, the music tradition of each of these areas is distinct as a result of the balance of external influences and original autochthonous elements. It also seems evident that language can function as a parallel indicator of relatedness in the isolation of musical styles. Within Burma, the music of the Burmese, the Shan and the Mon is each clearly distinct from the others. Yet, while the music of the Arakanese, who live on the western coastal area of Burma, is also distinct, the relationship of it to the music of Burmese is much closer, reflecting as it does the almost dialect relationship between their two languages. If we think of the Burmese as a distinct language group upon which various outside factors have had political and cultural influence of varying degrees, we may find that this serves as a convenient parallel means by which to view the characteristics of its music.

However, even certain of the most fundamental questions concerning this music remain unclear. Buddhism entered Burma both from southern India and Ceylon. It is probable that some of the patterns of court life, perhaps including music, also came together with the new religion but it is not clear from which area cultural influence may have been greatest, or, in fact, whether the patterns of court life might not have been adopted from the old royal courts of Thailand or from the Shan, who were close relatives of the Thai. What seems clear, is that probably sometime after the establishment of the Pagan culture in the eleventh century there began to evolve two different kinds of music in the court. There was a court chamber music which may also have been used to accompany dance, and there was, in addition, a kind of ceremonial music heard outdoors.

The distinction between these two types of music is important in that this distinction between an indoor and outdoor ensemble survives to form the basis of Burmese music today. Although it is difficult to point to a precise period during which a chamber ensemble was in use in the royal court, several different instruments have appeared at various times in post Pagan Burma and may have, indeed, constituted something like an ensemble. These instruments were the harp, saung gauk, the xylophone, patala, the crocodile shaped zither, mi-jaung, the mouth organ, hnyin, the end-blown flute, palwe, an instrument which is no longer known today called sandeya, and finally a bowed fiddle, tayaw. Of these, the saung and the patala continue as the most frequently encountered Burmese instruments from the court tradition. The hnyin has long disappeared from Burma except as an instrument used by certain of the tribal hill peoples. The tayaw has disappeared as well and not even any pictorial evidence remains of it. We must assume that the it was a bowed fiddle of the general spiked type like the Javanese rebab and Thai saw-u and also most likely not seen in Burma before the 12th century, the general date from which instruments of this type begin to make their appearance anywhere in Asia. The sandeya may have been a type of mallet struck dulcimer, the word today being frequently used to signify the Western piano. The mi-jaung while still in evidence in Thailand as the chake, is found in Burma today played only among the Mon peoples. This instrument was, however, played in Burma until very recently. There exists a photograph of the great Mandalay musician and composer, Sein Be Da, playing a mi-jaung and there are still a few old instruments lying about in the collections of living Burmese musicians. To the best of my knowledge, however, the mi-jaung is no longer used for Burmese music. In point of fact, this is actually not entirely true. In terms of its playing style and general timbre, it is very likely that the mi-jaung has been completely replaced by the western guitar and thus, in a sense, still survives. This possibility becomes more apparent when one considers that the guitar as it is usually played in Burma, makes use of a steel bar sliding across the strings in the manner of either the American bottle neck or Hawaiian styles. The resulting sound is quite similar though more powerful than the sound of the mi-jaung, which is also played by means of a bar sliding across the strings. While pictorial evidence as well as written records indicate that these instruments all played together in an ensemble and could be used to accompany the voice and at times even function as accompaniment to the dance, they have not been heard in this manner in living memory. Today, the harp, saung gauk, plays alone or in accompaniment to the human voice and the same is true of the patala. On occasion, one may hear performances of the saung and patala together but this is only a

very recent and very modern attempt to recombine these instruments as they were thought to have been used in the days of the Burmese kings. While this might be acceptable under certain circumstances as an attempt to revive older performance practices, in fact, the playing style of both the *patala* and the *saung* have now evolved as virtuoso solo instruments in their manner of interpreting the basic repertoire and there is no evidence that they were playing in this manner even as recently as a hundred years ago.

What has survived of the older ensemble practice in which a group of varied instruments playing together exists today only in the use of the *tayaw* or the *palwe* in the ensemble. The *tayaw* itself has completely disappeared but it has been replaced by the western violin. It is not uncommon to hear the violin or the flute, the *palwe* played in combination with the *saung* or the *patala* and in accompaniment of the human voice. These instruments, when heard with the human voice and the bell and the clapper, *si* and *wa*, together give some possible idea of the sound of the older court ensemble. Nothing, however, can quite duplicate the sound which might have been added by the mouth organ, *hnyin* and, unfortunately, its possible role in the old court ensemble must be left to the imagination.

The old ceremonial outdoor ensemble of the royal courts of Burma is the same as that which later came to be known as the *si-daw* or *si-daw-gyi* ensemble. During the last days of the monarchy, this ensemble was used to mark the procession of the king in and out of the main gates of the capital with special compositions to mark the nature of his arrival or departure. Thus, there were certain compositions such as the *Aung Ba Zei* to indicate going to battle, the *Ye Dou* to signify a glorious return from war. There were also special compositions like *Twet To Mu Ga Me Pava* to be played when the king returns from a visit to a pagoda or *Lehto Mingala*, when he went to the rice fields to symbolically participate in the ploughing. Another of the important functions of this ensemble was to mark the hours of the watch which it did by the performance of special music called *neyi*, meaning time. As such, the *si-daw* ensemble is related to a great number of ensembles which ranged from Korea to Renaissance middle Europe whose primary function was to provide processional music from the city gates and to mark the hours. Even today the first broadcast of the day on the Burma Broadcasting Service begins with playing of the *neyi*.

The *si-daw* ensemble survives today as one of a number of Burmese ensembles which are in part ceremonial and in part folk ensembles. With the abolition of the Royal Burmese court under

British rule the old functions of the si-daw and neyi music were no longer needed, yet, the music for them somehow managed to survive as a characteristic part of the repertoire. The si-daw continues to be heard in Burma, appearing as part of the general outdoor entertainment at pagoda fairs and at local festivals. The old court repertoire continues to be heard in this manner.

The si-daw ensemble continued its function in the court providing ceremonial processional music, while in inner chambers of the court, the voice, harp and xylophone, along with possible others held sway. Eventually, and under circumstances which are today not entirely clear, a new ensemble gradually took precedence for almost all outdoor performances involving dance or theater. This ensemble, the hsaing, or hsaing waing soon became as characteristic of the music of Burma as the playing of the harp. The hsaing remains today the standard accompaniment for the dance and the theater and provides the most usual entertainment for the guests at neighborhood festivities such as the shin-byu, the festivities surrounding a young boy's temporary entry into the monkhood. The hsaing also has another virtually important function in the Burmese ritual life. This is its role in the performance of the music which forms the basis of the Nat spirit propitiation and possession ceremonies, or nat-pwe.

The exact origins of the hsaing, or hsaing-waing ensemble in Burma are not precise. It is clearly the Burmese counterpart of the various gong and drum ensembles found throughout Southeast Asia and Indonesia. What is less clear, however, is the point in time at which it first appears in Burma and what its exact antecedents may have been. After the eleventh century, direct Burmese contact with India became greatly reduced while contact with Ceylon and what is today known as Thailand intensified. Since some of the earliest pictorial evidence of the hsaing ensemble in Burma comes only from the seventeenth century, after the Burmese attack on the Thai capital, Ayuthia, it may be that the concept of a gong and drum ensemble came to Burma from there, although the tuned drums themselves appear never to have been used in Thailand. It is known that many artists were brought back to Burma along with other captives from Ayuthia and that the masked theater based on the Ramayana was also brought into the Burmese court by the same process. It is quite possible, therefore, that the concept of the gong and drum ensemble appeared at the same time. The fact that nothing quite like this ensemble is known to have existed in Ceylon or ancient India also suggests that Thailand may have been a more likely point of introduction. In any case, above and beyond the uniqueness of the Burmese music style, the hsaing ensemble itself, with its equal emphasis on drums as well as gongs and its lightness due to

having only a single instrument of each type in the ensemble, is unlike all the other Southeast Asian and Indonesian counterparts and is thoroughly and uniquely Burmese in structure and character, so much so as to continue to raise questions about the manner in which it evolved.

Although today the hsaing ensemble used for the nat-pwe is identical to the standard hsaing used for the secular Burmese dance and theater in terms of the instruments which make up the ensemble, the repertoire for each type of hsaing is entirely distinct, so much so that one may think of them as two different hsaing ensembles. The distinction between these two types of hsaing is important and will be mentioned again subsequently. For the moment, let us compare the si-daw ensemble with the hsaing. The two main identifying instruments of the si-daw ensemble are the double reed pipe, the hne, and the pair of large ceremonial drums, the si-daw themselves. In the case of the si-daw ensemble, actually a large variant of the hne, the hne-gyi is always employed. In addition to these two instruments, the si and wa, the bell and clapper and a double-headed drum called gandama are used. This small set of instruments is, in fact, quite adequate to the needs of a small ceremonial group.

The hsaing ensemble of today consists of a combination of drums and gongs. The main instruments of the ensemble are the double reed pipe. hne and a set of twenty-one tuned drums mounted in a circle usually called pat-waing but sometimes more generally, hsaing-wan, taking the name of the ensemble itself. In addition to these two instruments, there is a set of small high pitched bronze gongs mounted in a circular frame and called kyi-waing, a set of slightly larger and middle range bronze gongs mounted in a rectangular frame and called maung-hsaing. As in other Burmese performance combinations the bell and clapper, si and wa are employed to maintain the basic metric patterns of the compositions. The last instrument is the chawk lon bat of which more will be said. The earliest pictorial evidence for the hsaing ensemble shows only the pat-waing, the hne, the kyi-waing and a large barrel drum hanging in a frame, the sakun.¹

There is little information available concerning the development of the maung-hsaing. The lack of early documentary evidence suggests that it may have been first used only in the present century. As to the pat-waing itself, earliest pictorial evidence shows a player seated in the middle of a complete circle of drums, however, with the wooden frame considerably lower and less ornate than is currently the custom. There is in use in certain small ensembles a special form of the pat-waing, called la-char-hsaing, or "half-moon" hsaing. The number of drums is

half the number of the complete circle and actually consists of a half frame when compared to the standard pat-waing. While it is tempting to speculate on the possibility that the la-chan-hsaing may have been a step in the evolutionary process which led to the pat-waing, there is as yet no tangible evidence to suggest this. It is possible that the la-chan-hsaing simply evolved as a smaller and more easily portable version of the complete pat-waing.

Meanwhile, the remaining instrument of the ensemble to be discussed, the chauk lon bat is, in fact, a group of instruments. This set of instruments, all of which are drums, take its most commonly used name, chauk lon bat or six drums, from a set of six drums similar in construction to those which form part of the drum circle, pat-waing. Each of these drums, like each of those in the pat-waing set, are individually tuned by application of a small amount of tuning paste made of cooked rice mixed with ash and applied to the center of the drum. The chauk lon bat can include as few as four such drums, although six is the general rule. The player of the chauk lon bat also plays two other drums. These are the large barrel drums, the shkun and the pat-ma. These large drums are usually hung each in an individual frame; however, today in the large Burmese State ensembles, they tend to be set on small stands, unlike the chauk lon bat drums which sit directly on the ground on one end and are only played on the top heads. The player of the chauk does most of the playing on either of the two larger drums and uses the higher pitched set of six drums, the chauk lon bat itself, to give greater highlight and emphasis to the patterns played on the larger drum. The complex array of drums being played by a single player who appears to move freely, if informally from one drum to another may, at first impression, seem, however, somewhat confusing.

The chauk lon bat appears to be of rather recent provenance. Even as recently as the 1920s and 1930s it does not appear to have been in general usage. Although it is seen for the first time only quite recently, it has become a very important element in the Burmese ensemble. It is important not only the hsaing ensemble. Today, almost inevitably, whenever Western style music other than the most modern rock is performed and when all instruments are of European origin, the chauk lon bat is the sole Burmese instrument which is regarded as necessary to the smooth performance of the ensemble.

Before considering this question in more detail, let us look at the broader pattern of development in Burmese music viewed from the scant evidence we have available to us. What we have

presented thus far, is a picture of the little we know of music ensemble types during the days of the kings of Burma in contrast to what exists in Burma today. The old court chamber ensemble of the Burmese kings was used to accompany song as well as dance. This has evolved today into what we might call a solo ensemble, one in which one solo instrument, either the saung or the patala dominates and others like the si and wa, the modern violin, or the palwe, however important, only provide support.

It is interesting that the chamber ensemble is no longer seen as appropriate for the accompaniment of dance. The dance of the court itself is said to survive in the tradition of the dance of the Anyein. In old pictorial evidence, the Anyein dancer is seen dancing to the accompaniment of the harp or the patala. Today Anyein dancers in Rangoon tend to use the full hsaing as accompaniment to their dance and song. In the Mandalay area, and in other locales as well, perhaps, the Anyein dancer is accompanied by an ensemble that at first glance appears to be a hsaing ensemble with the addition of a patala. It is, however, quite possible that this older variant of the Anuein troupe is an expanded version of the patala, si, and wa,² to which are added chauk lon bat and la-chan-hsaing or pat-waing.

The chamber ensemble today only accompanies the singing of the human voice. The dance accompaniment has been completely taken up by the hsaing ensemble. This pattern of change suggests strongly that for reasons which are no longer clear, the Burmese chamber ensemble gradually evolved from a cohesive heterophonic ensemble to one which emphasized virtuosity and flexibility and thus required fewer instruments to accomplish this. At some point in time and perhaps not very long ago, the saung and the patala began to develop virtuosic tendencies. Recent evidence suggests that the saung became an important influence in the development of Burmese music most recently. One of the artists who exacted greatest influence on the recent development of the playing of the saung is the still living harpist, U Ba Than, whose brilliant performance is known to many having been copied from a pre WW II 78 recording and included in the Folkways LP of Traditional Music of Burma which appeared more than thirty years ago.

The contrast between a simpler and perhaps, older style of playing can be heard regularly in the contrast between the style of solo playing and the style used to accompany the singing voice. In current practice, the saung as well as the patala may alternate each phrase of a song, the first sung and accompanied in simple style which is then followed immediately by a repetition of the same phrase now played in the more ornate solo

instrumental style. This alternation of phrases, first simple then densely ornamented, has become standard practice in Burmese music, a practice often followed in hsaing performances.

It is commonly stated by Burmese musicians that sometime about the turn of the present century, the virtuosity of the Burmese harpists began to have an influence on all Burmese musicians, even to the players of the pat-waing. Today, the actual melodic figures used in improvisations on the pat-waing are so filled with phrases which probably originated with the harp that it would be difficult to separate them all out. Together with the development and incorporation of phrases and figures borrowed from the harp, hsaing players began to resort to the old music of the palace watch and in particular one composition in this form, the ye-gin, is quoted almost anytime the pat-waing player executes a passage demanding rapid fire playing technique. During the same period when this emphasis on virtuosity was developing we can note that certain players of the drum circle, the pat-waing, who incidentally are always the leaders of the hsaing ensemble, come to take on the quality of "stars."

The use of professional stage names is now standard practice. Ordinarily, all Burmese adult males are addressed by the term of respect u or uncle. The exception is for those who are young enough, or just junior enough to the speaker to be addressed as ko, younger brother. Very young men may be addressed as maung. A person of learning such as a teacher will be addressed by the term saya. These terms of address are universal for Burmese males and therefore the use of different terms by leaders of the hsaing ensembles, like sein, "diamond," mya, "emerald," or shwei, "golden" sets them apart from the rest of society when they are on stage. The use of special terms of address by hsaing musicians in a society as homogeneous as that of Burma clearly emphasizes their special role and explains the need for the reinforcement of this individuality by the employment of virtuosic performance techniques. One of the formal elements of the Burmese hsaing performance, perhaps borrowed from the Burmese theater, is the use of "stand-up" comics or clowns, in Burmese lu-byet, on stage engaging in dialogue and comic repartee with the leader of the hsaing. It is not uncommon for a hsaing leader, in dialogue with the lu-byet, to explain during the course of performance what is unique about his own manner of interpretation and perhaps even to go so far as to give an imitation of how lesser musicians might be forced to interpret the same composition.

The first musician with whom we associate this artistic image in Burma is the late Sein Be Da, whose name means literally "Diamond Water Hyacinth." He has often been called the last court musician to the kings of Burma because he was selected to go to Ratnagiri in India to play for the last king of Burma, Thibaw, who had been exiled there by the British in 1885 and remained there until his death in 1916. Sein Be Da was also known to have added spice to his performances in Burma by sometimes appearing dressed, for the very proper Burmese, outrageously in a rugby shirt together with the traditional Burmese loungyi. Yet there is a certain fascinating duality in the manner in which Sein Be Da is regarded. He is still regarded by most hsaing musicians, in fact by everyone I ever met and spoke with, as the undisputed leader and source of the modern Burmese hsaing style. Many Burmese musicians, particularly around Mandalay, still refer to him, respectfully, yet more personally, by using the common term of respect, as U Be Da. He died during the 1940s. Yet, when we compare recordings of Sein Be Da made before WW II with those performances of more contemporary hsaing musicians, the contrast in the complexity of the ensemble performance as well as in the individual level of virtuosity expected of the leader himself seems astounding.

Of the traditional Burmese hsaing ensemble, the pre-World War II recordings of Sein Be Da are among the oldest. Although these recordings can tell us much about the recent changes in the style, it is difficult to trace much of the long term development of the hsaing style since all the available examples of performance date from well after the time when the harp style had begun to manifest its influence. The performance style used in connection with the propitiation and possession ceremonies for the nat spirits, on the other hand, being more conservative by requirement as part of a ritual ceremonial rather than being theatrical, has preserved much of the older hsaing performance style. In the nat-hsaing style, the pat-waing continues to function as leader but plays in a simpler and more direct style playing the main melody in its simple form while maintaining the fundamental pattern of the rhythm for the composition. Much less use is made of the higher pitched drums of the pat-waing circle than is common among the modern hsaing musicians. The most recent commercial Burmese recordings of the nat-hsaings, however, are already showing the influence of the more virtuosic hsaing-waing style.

Old photographs dating from the 1920s and 1930s show the hsaing ensemble without what is today an important mainstay of the ensemble, the chawk lon pat. Instead, only one of the two large drums, the pat-ma or the sahkun appears. From this

evidence, we may surmise that in the development of what we know today as the hsaing ensemble, in addition to the melody playing instruments like the hne, kyi-waing, and pat-waing, a large drum of the patma, or sahkun type was necessary to provide increased rhythmic stability to that outlined by the bell and clapper. Each of these two large drums, the patma and the sahkun must have functioned in a manner similar to that of all other two headed barrel drums of India and Southeast Asia. Each head is tightened so as to produce a distinctly different pitch and by use of strokes a different type and variety of sounds can be produced permitting great delicacy in delineation of the rhythmic pattern. In the old hsaing ensemble we must assume that the pat-waing also complemented this function in its execution of the simple song pattern while outlining an elemental rhythmic pattern, such as one still hears in the traditional nat-hsaing.

As the modern hsaing style became increasingly influenced by the development of virtuosity in the playing of the Burmese harp, the saung, it became necessary for the pat-waing player to relinquish much of the basic rhythmic function in his playing in order to concentrate on moving rapidly across all of the drums in imitation of the harp. This left a larger share of the pat-ma. The addition of the six small drums, the chauk lon bat themselves, to the pat-ma and sahkun was an imaginative stroke of genius. The function of these six drums is to provide a greater variety of high pitched textures to contrast with the lower fundamental sounds of the pat-ma and sahkun. As the player outlines the basic pattern in high and low tones on either the sahkun or pat-ma, the added tone provided on the six drums of the chauk lon bat offer additional possibilities for contrast and clearer delineation of the pattern. At the same time that these additional tones help in providing rhythmic punctuation they also permit the player to give the suggestion of the older simple melodic function provided by the pat-waing in the old hsaing ensemble. With the increase in the emphasis on virtuosity in the playing of Burmese music, the need for a more flexible yet stabilizing instrument of rhythmic support like the chauk lon bat became increasingly important in all modern Burmese ensembles.

NOTES

1. There is one additional Burmese instrument which although never, to my knowledge used in the hsaing ensemble, seems clearly related to the instruments of that ensemble. This is an instrument called than-patala, or "iron patala," in reference to the fact that the keys are made of iron. This instrument is not simply an iron keyed version of the bamboo keyed patala, but distinct as witnessed by the fact the keys of the than-patala are always laid flat on the surface of the resonating box which is also flat. The wa-patal, or "bamboo patals," as the ordinary patala is described in contrast to the iron keyed version, always has a boat shaped contour following the rise at the ends of the resonating box. The than-patala is, however, quite rare in Burma today, although still encountered occasionally. It most often performs together with the bamboo patala as a kind of reduction of the complete hsaing ensemble.
2. This idea was suggested by information kindly provided from John Okell.

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List of Plates

1. Hsaing ensemble showing pat-ma and sahkun but without chauk lon bat. The larger frame contains the pat-waing and the smaller is the kyi-waing. From Winter, Consort, after New York Public Library. No date given.
2. Hsaing ensemble with pat-ma. After Ferrars, Burma, 1901.
3. Hsaing ensemble with pat-ma. After Sachs, 1943 from New York Public Library. No date given.
4. Hsaing ensemble with pat-ma. After Ferrars, 1901.
5. Forerunner of the present Burmese State Theater Orchestra, the hsaing of U Han Pat, seated center. The frame on the right of the stage contains the chauk lon bat. Rangoon, 1955.
6. Chauk lon bat and maung-hsaing as part of ensemble accompanying ball game, hcin-loun. Mandalay, 1974. Photo by Robert Garfias.
7. Chauk lon bat of the Burma State Theater Ensemble with pat-ma and sahkun. Rangoon, 1973. Photo by Robert Garfias.
8. Si-daw-gyi ensemble. Mandalay, 1974. Photo by Robert Garfias.
9. Saung-gauk player Ma Pa-Ba-Lin, Rangoon, 1974. Robert Garfias.
10. Burmese Violin and guitar showing the guitar technique perhaps similar to that used for the mi-jaung. Rangoon, 1974.

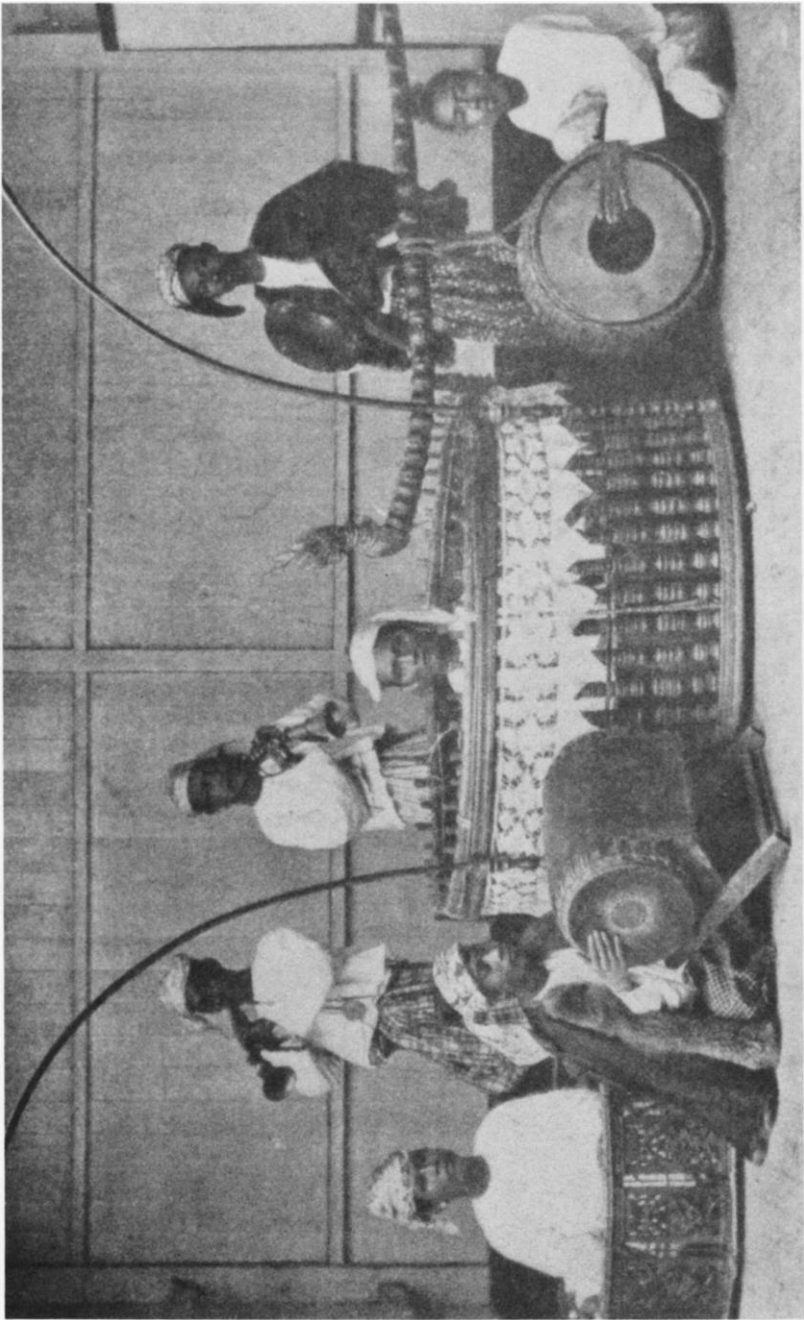


Plate 1

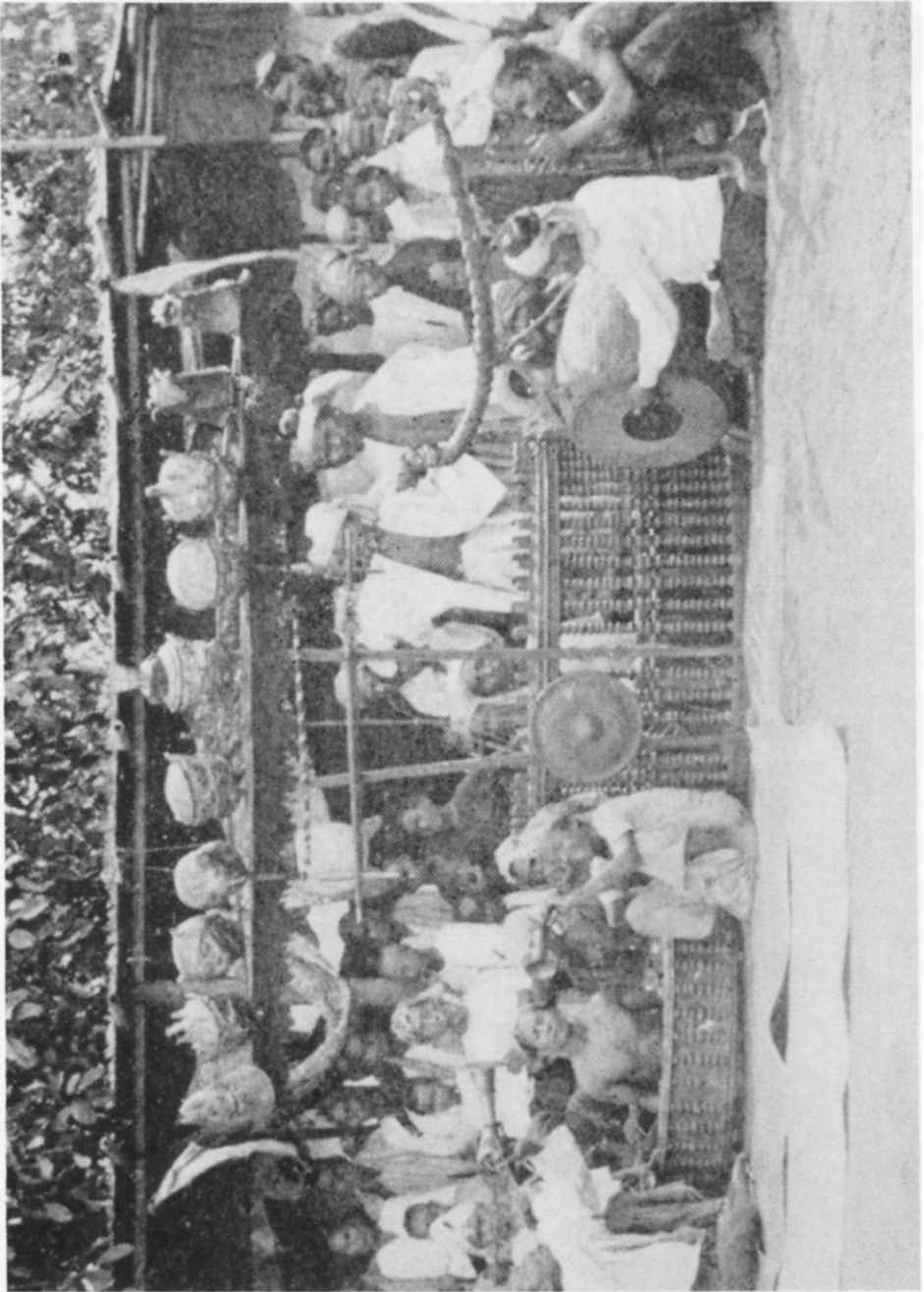


Plate 2

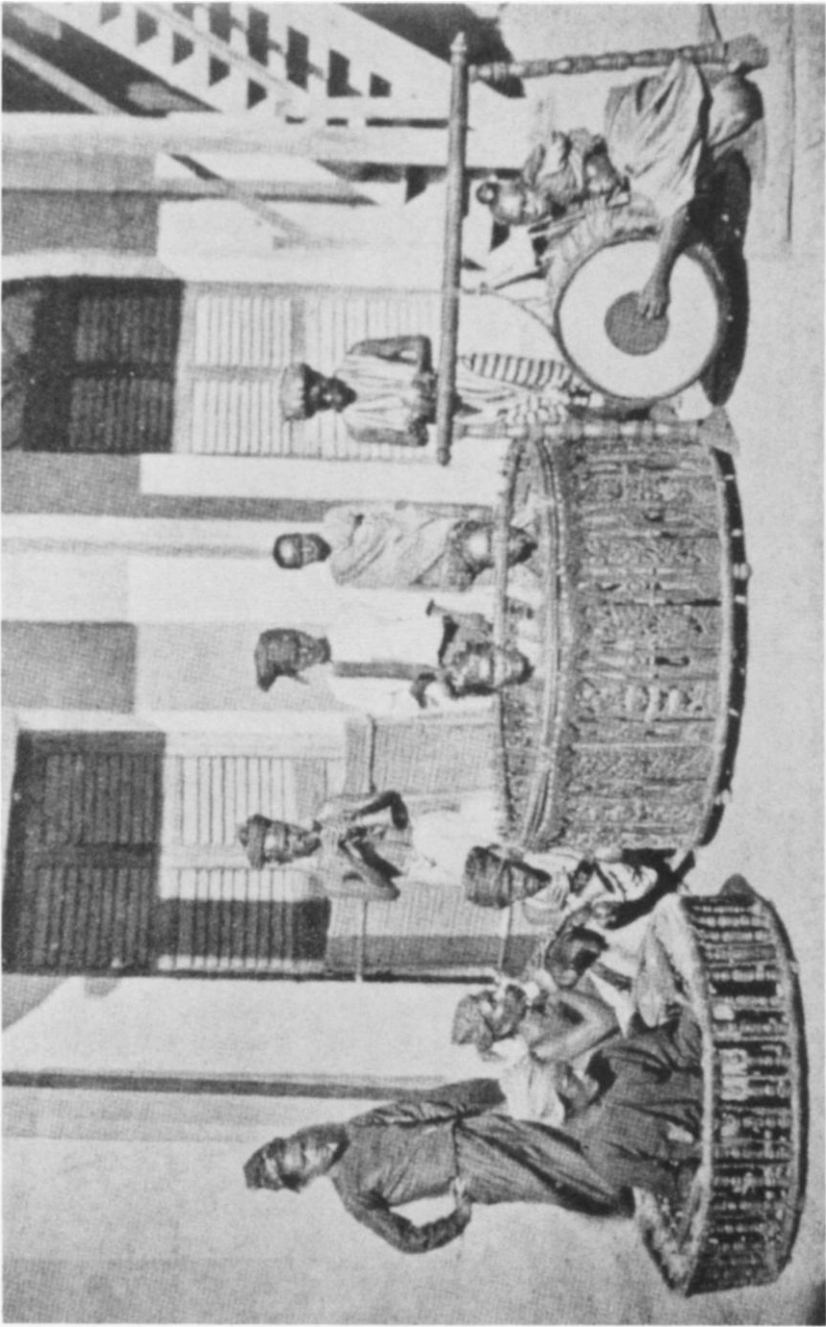


Plate 3

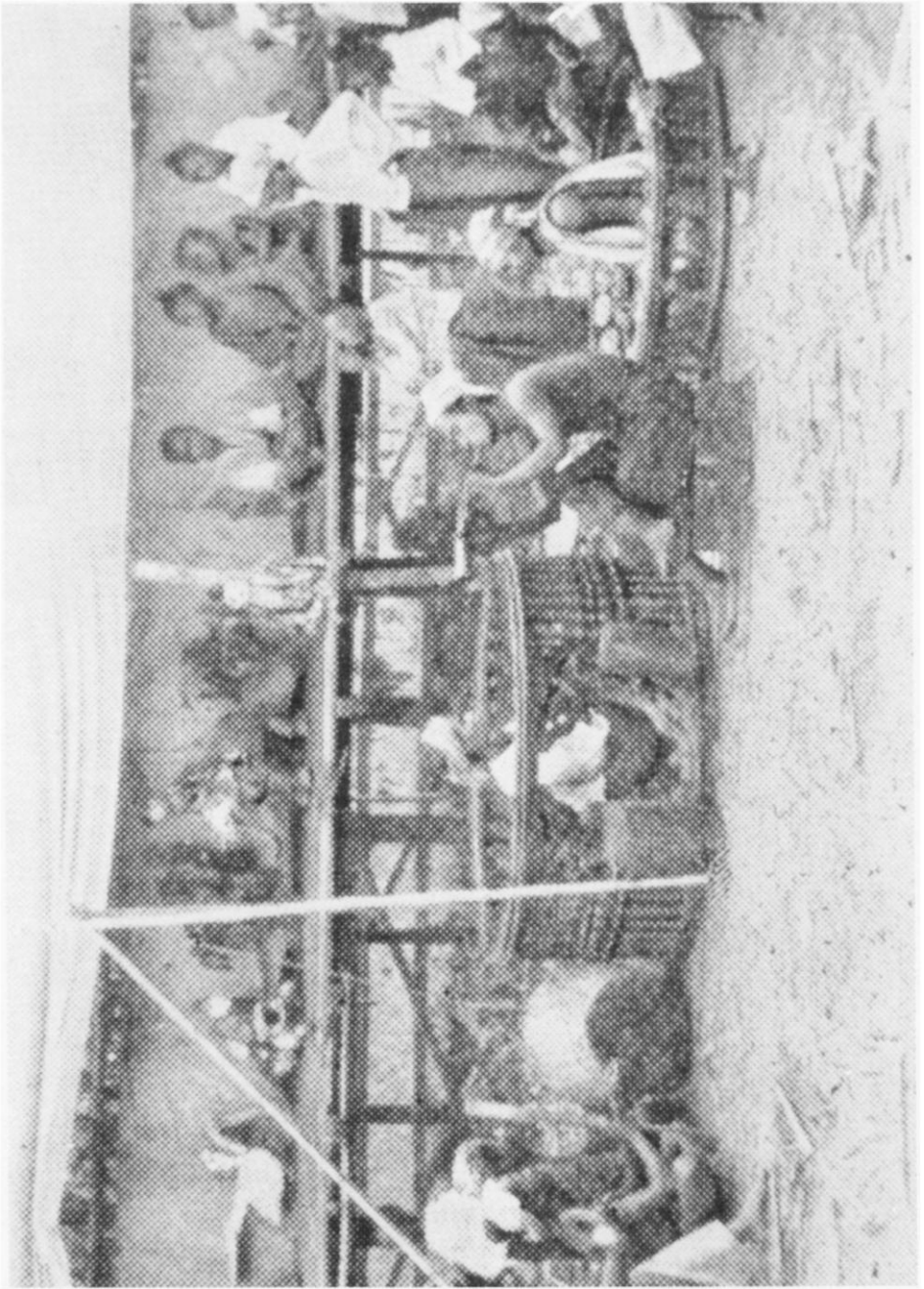


Plate 4

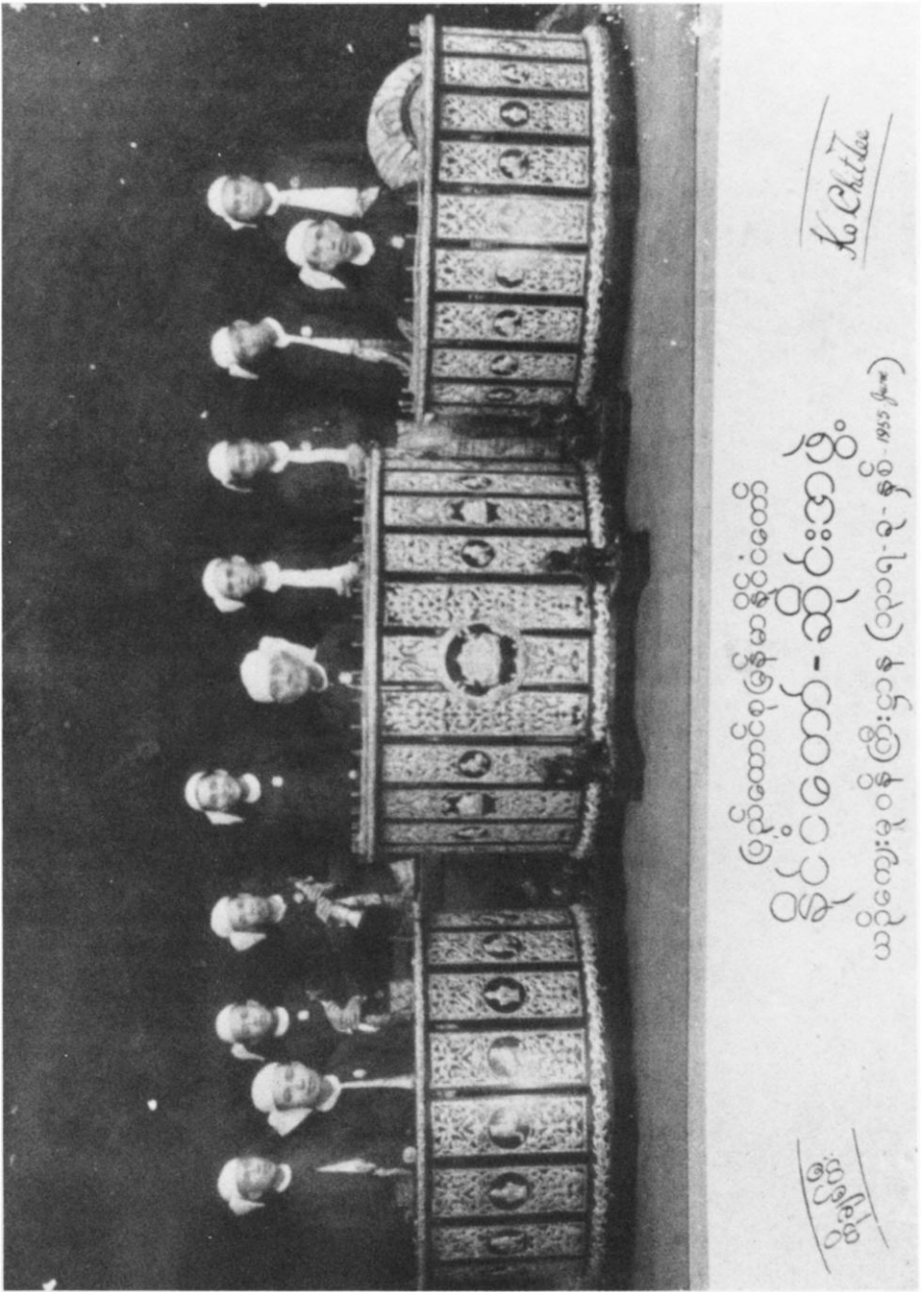


Plate 5

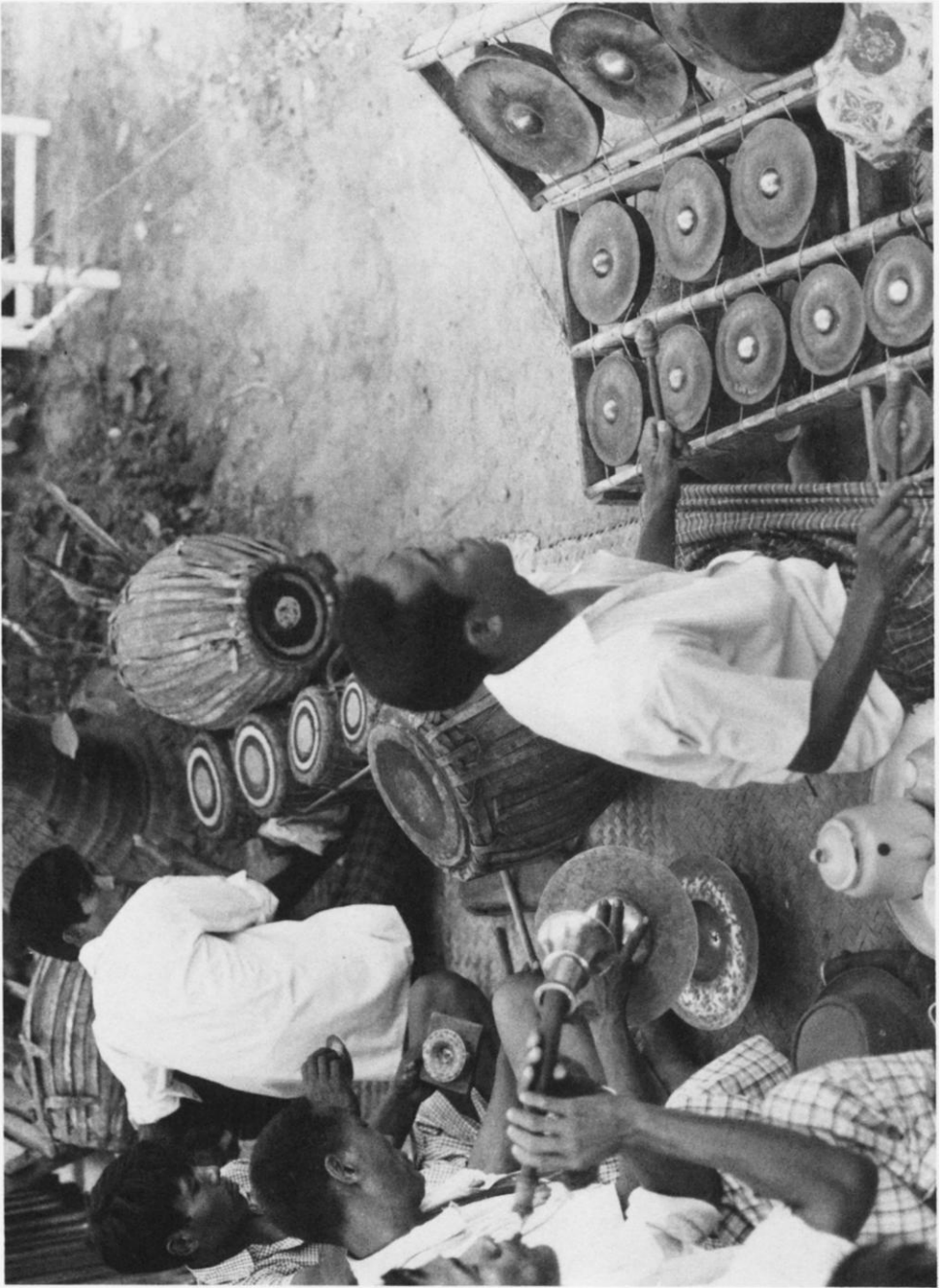


Plate 6

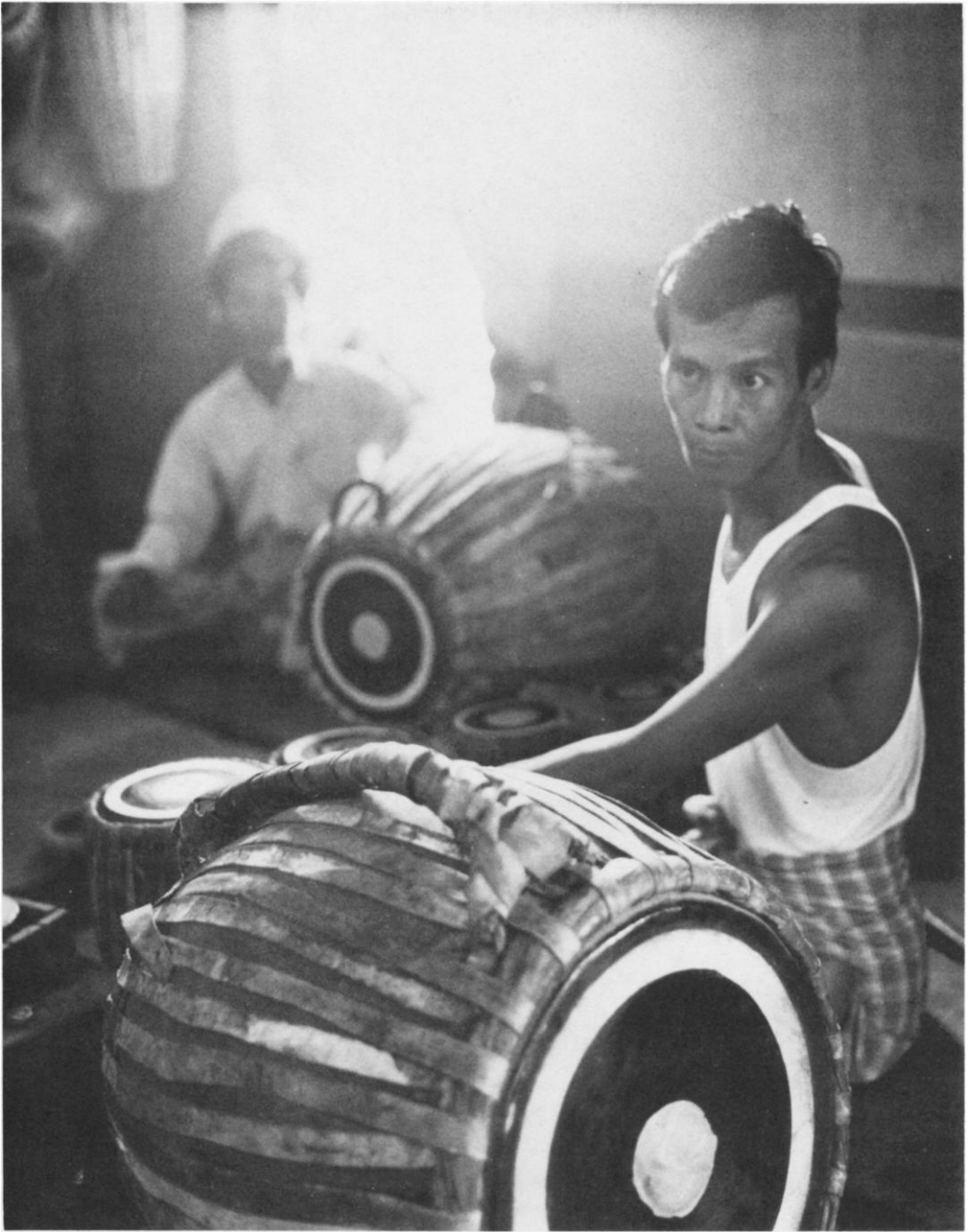


Plate 7



Plate 8



Plate 9



Plate 10



Plate 11



Plate 12