

# A Contribution to the Ethnomusicology of Trang: Musical Instruments Collected by American Naturalist William Louis Abbott in 1896

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**ABSTRACT**—This article presents information about Trang in southern Thailand from two trips there by the American naturalist William Louis Abbott (1860-1936), focusing on twelve locally used musical instruments Abbott collected in 1896 on his first visit. A second visit (late December 1898 to March 1899) provided another opportunity for him to record observations. The musical instruments he collected are now in the Ethnology collection (Department of Anthropology) of the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. The information presented here adds to the relatively few 19th-century primary sources for the ethnography and music of southern Thailand. This article also notes similarities between some of these village instruments and the elaborately decorated but structurally similar ones produced under royal patronage for the Thai court, represented within the same Smithsonian collection by other musical instruments received as royal gifts from Thai monarchs.

## Introduction

This article follows up on the author's prior studies about the large Smithsonian collections assembled by the American naturalist collector William Louis Abbott (1860-1935) from many parts of the world. Taylor (2014) previously summarized the position of Abbott's two Thailand visits within the context of his lifelong traveling and collecting for the Smithsonian; then separately described Abbott's visits and collections carried out among the "Chow pah" (*Maniq*) Negritos of the Trang-Pattalung border highlands (Taylor 2015a).

The present article's primary purpose is simply to present the previously unpublished data Abbott himself collected about these twelve musical instruments, with photographs and other collection information. I also briefly relate these instruments to examples described in standard compilations about Thai music. Abbott's records, though not extensive, include useful and unique information, for example about local usage or about plant and animal products used to make the instruments. Ideally, one should take information on "legacy collections" like these back into the field, among today's descendants of those whom he visited in the 1890s, to record any local memories about them and perspectives on their continuing usage or transformations. Though I have been unable to do that in this case, I am grateful to Dr. Nachaya Natchanawakul, Ph.D.,

Program Chair of Mahidol University's College of Music and an authority on Thai traditional music, who kindly shared an earlier version of photographs and information presented here with two local scholars of traditional music in southern Thailand, whose comments on the instruments Abbott collected (as conveyed in interviews with Dr. Natchanawakul) are included in my summary account of the twelve objects below. I express my sincere thanks to Dr. Natchanawakul, and to both scholars she contacted: Assistant Prof. Dr. Ratchavit Musicarun, Dept. of Thai Music, Faculty of Fine Arts, Songkhla Rajabhat University, Songkhla (interviewed 9 August 2010), and Assistant Prof. Thummanit Nikomrat, Dept. of Performing Art, Faculty of Fine Arts, Thaksin University, Songkhla (interviewed 12 August 2019).

In fact, however, a far better-known component of the Smithsonian's Thai collections arrived quite separately from Abbott's scientific (including ethnographic) specimens—these are the royal gifts from Thai monarchs to the United States. This paper also follows up on a previous paper (Taylor and Smith 2017) about the Smithsonian's twenty-five musical instruments given by Thai monarchs (six instruments from King Mongkut and from Phra Pinklao accompanying the Harris Treaty of 1856, and nineteen instruments sent for Philadelphia's Centennial Exposition of 1876). That publication noted that several of the instruments were royal court versions of instruments that also had rural or village forms; and that a few had “*malayu*” (meaning “Malay”) in their names, indicating an origin in the Malay-speaking southern regions of Thailand or from elsewhere in the Malay Peninsula.

Abbott's ethnographic objects from Trang seem to offer a rich source of comparison



Figure 1. Hand drums: 1a. Hand drum collected by Abbott in Trang, 1896, with original label. (See details at Figures 11a-c.) 1b. Hand drum *thon mahori*, gifted by King Chulalongkorn to the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition, 1876. Catalog no. E27307. 34 cm height x 23 cm diameter.

with the courtly “variants” of those structurally and functionally similar musical instruments made for courtly use. This makes it perhaps even more important to provide information on this well-provenanced collection from Trang, since there are few available sources of information on contemporaneous rural southern Thai musical instruments, to which better-known 19th-century courtly varieties may be related. While similarities are visible, at least superficially, the directionality and history of influences between court and village instruments is unproven. Compare for example Abbott’s ethnographic specimen of a Trang hand drum collected in 1896 (Figure 1a) to the Smithsonian’s royal gift of a similarly constructed but magnificently decorated hand drum given in 1876 by King Chulalongkorn to the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia (Figure 1b).

Among the 1876 royal gifts from King Chulalongkorn we also find a pair of so-called “Malay drums” (*klong Malayu*) which bear structural similarities to several of Abbott’s 1896 drums from Trang. Both in these examples and in the hand drums above, we see a courtly elaboration of high-cost decorative media overlain on this instrument’s wooden, rattan and skin structure. Note in Figure 2c the beautiful pattern of gold leaf over the orange-red paint on courtly examples, in contrast to the stark wooden vernacular drums Abbott collected in Trang (Figures 2a, 2b).

These comparisons between courtly and rural musical instruments may exemplify a 19th-century phenomenon found today in Thailand’s 20th and 21st century pattern of royal patronage, in which court workshops create very elaborate versions of “simple” rural crafts like basket-making. Under recent royal patronage, for example at the Queen Sirikit Institute or the SUPPORT Foundation in Bangkok, rural basketry media and techniques have been revived and transformed into an art form incorporating gold, silver, diamonds, and other gems (see Nida et al. 2007: 147-152). The current transformation of simple rural basketry reflects royal encouragement for honoring traditional and rural Thai identity by transforming such simple village commodities into costly and prestigious works of art (Taylor and Snitwongse, *in press*). A similar phenomenon may have been occurring within the 19th-century Thai court and its performing arts, whereby hegemony over the furthest reaches of Thailand’s territory got reflected in the representation (and “upgrading” into courtly forms) of Trang’s



Figure 2. Overview comparison of drums collected by Abbott in Trang in 1896 (2a, 2b; see details in Figures 6a-c, 7a-c below) with a pair of drums listed as “*klong Malayu*” or “Malay drums” gifted by King Chulalongkorn for the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exposition (2c). Catalog no. E27315. 53 cm height x 18.5 cm diameter.

performing art or craft traditions. The presentation of original information about little-known contemporaneous rural or vernacular forms from throughout Thailand may help to explore such possibilities.

Scholars of Thai and Southeast Asian music have long lamented a relative lack of attention to the music traditions of certain countries, regions or strata of society. Miller and Chonpairot (1979: 1) asserted that: “Although Thailand has been among the most accessible countries in Southeast Asia to scholars, its musical traditions constitute an underworked field.” Kartomi (1995) noted that within Thai studies there is a relatively greater emphasis on courtly rather than rural or vernacular traditions of performing arts in Thailand, associating this bias with the colonial ethos prevalent elsewhere in Southeast Asia. She argued that even though Thailand was the only Southeast Asian country never to be colonized, Thai scholars “were nevertheless influenced by the colonial ethos of the region” (1995: 366). This same observation about the prevailing interest in courtly over folk arts is a trope found in descriptions of other arts as well, such as Johnson’s (2006) observations on the performing arts.

Unlike the classical court arts of central Thailand which have for a long time captured national and academic imagination, the nang talung’s primarily rural and working class audience base has left it largely neglected by scholars interested in so-called classical genres. Academic interest in studying nang talung and other Thai folk arts peaked in the 1970s during national attempts at inventing regional traditions as markers of Thai nationhood and as avenues through which the official rhetoric of rural development could be transmitted. (Johnson 2006: 151)

Studying early, well-provenanced collections of musical instruments like this (even when, as in this case, there is no associated sound recording) may also help interpret other generalizations about southern Thai music history. One example is the idea that a sort of core southern musical form exists, discernible in some way within or underneath the over-layerings formed by imported musical elements. Sumrongthong (2001) writes, for example:

In general, it can be said that the Southern Thai musical culture has developed primarily through the inclusion and incorporation of music and instruments from outside its own region. Its music is therefore defined by how it has chosen to include, modify or blend outside influences both into and on to its existing musical base. The Southerners have created their own unique cultural identity by mixing the received musical impetuses with the traditional one while maintaining the core local rhythm that retains the listener’s feel for the original southern ambience. (Sumrongthong 2001: 101)

Samrongthong’s point can perhaps be clarified by noting that he was primarily contrasting the music of the intermixed Siamese, Malay, and Chinese population of Trang, which by the 19th century had become very exposed to global trade and cultural intermixtures, with the isolated “Sakai” or other Negrito tribal peoples. The latter are



represented by groups such as the Maniq or “Chow pah” who were also visited by Abbott in the Trang-Pattalung border highlands (Taylor 2015a). Samrongthong (ibid.) considered the tribal peoples’ music highly original and distinctive, in stark contrast to the majority population of Trang. Abbott himself visited the Chow pah on both his trips, but did not collect musical instruments nor record observations about music on those short visits.

Finally, another theme frequently mentioned within literature on southern Thai music is the urgency and importance of documenting musical traditions that are being lost through exposure to recent global trends in music. For example, Dowsey-Magog (2002: 185) argued that: “Thailand has never been colonized, but increasing foreign investment,

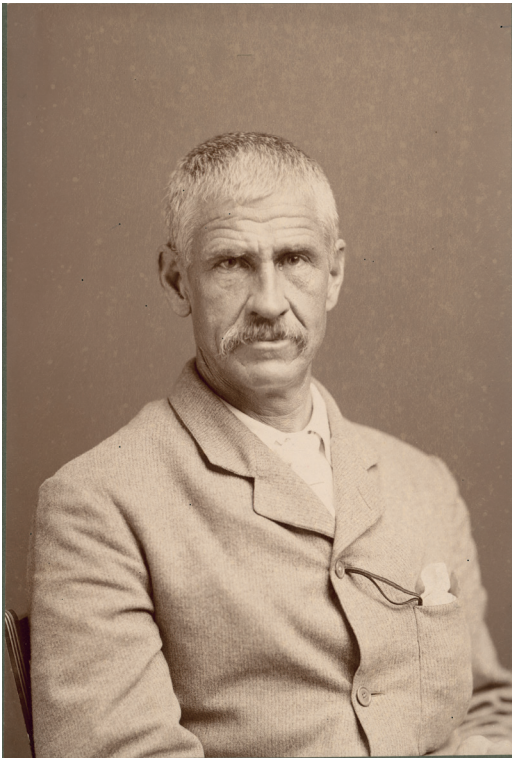


Figure 3. William Louis Abbott (1860-1936). National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution.

agrarian reform, industrialization, the introduction of media technology, and the rise of the middle class, particularly since the 1970s, have rapidly accelerated its exposure to the ‘global cultural flow’.” Like other Thai traditions, southern Thai music might adapt and incorporate outside influences, or might survive only as archived documentation or recordings. As Morton concluded in his important book on Thai traditional music overall, the “path of traditional Thai music lies in deep shadows, at a creative crossroads that could lead to new popularity or to the museum” (Morton 1976:224; cf. 1970). This statement seems already to have been true in the 1890s; Abbott found a vibrant music tradition in Trang that (thanks to him) did lead to the museum, where we now see evidence that Trang was indeed a creative crossroads of trade and globalization, which affected musical instruments as it did many other areas of life.

### William Louis Abbott’s two visits to Trang, 1896-1899

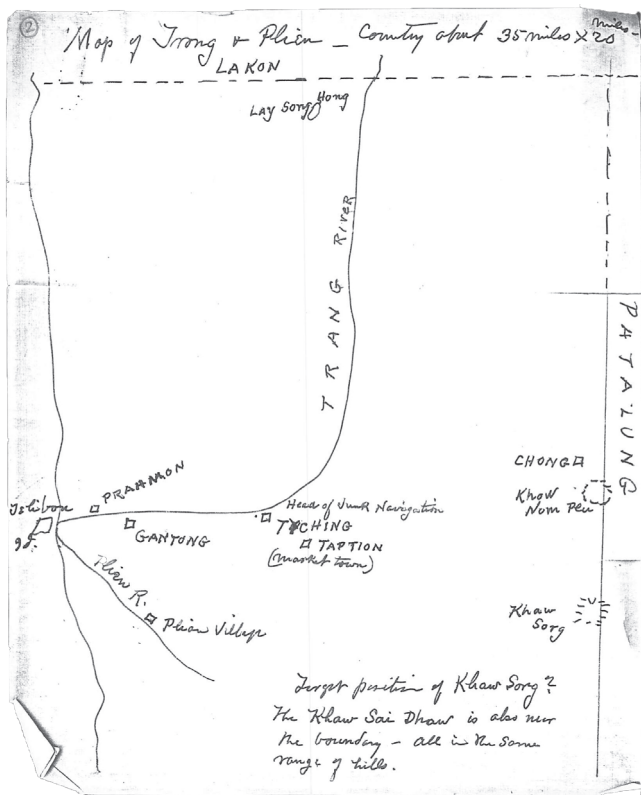
Abbott’s first expedition to Trang was from February 1896 to April 1897; the second from late December 1898 to March 1899. Before presenting information on the twelve locally used instruments he collected, I will review Abbott’s observations about the region from his mostly unpublished correspondence now in Smithsonian archives.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The author gratefully acknowledges the support of the Smithsonian Scholarly Studies Program, the Seidell Endowment and the Walcott Endowment for the study of Abbott’s archival and ethnographic collections. Information presented in this section about Abbott’s background and his Smithsonian correspondence was drawn from and uses material previously presented in Taylor (2014, 2015) and an earlier introduction to Abbott’s Indonesian collections (Taylor 2002) – none of which presented these musical instruments.



Figure 4. This “sketch map of Trong [Trang], with my collecting stations marked” is likely the map referenced as being enclosed in a 5 June 1897 letter from Abbott to Smithsonian ornithologist Charles Richmond. (This map, and the letter, are in the Smithsonian Archives.) Collecting “stations” probably refer to his biological collections, away from villages where he collected ethnographic materials.

Figure 5. Ink-drawn map of “Trong. Peninsular Siam: Routes of Dr. W.L. Abbott, 1897” (Smithsonian Archives).



Dr. William Louis Abbott (1860-1936) was a lifelong explorer and scientific collector, primarily donating his biological and ethnographic collections to the Smithsonian. Taylor (2014: 145) provides substantial background information and previously unpublished archival correspondence about Abbott's expeditions to Lower Siam. That article noted the many practical difficulties Abbott faced as a collector, especially during his first expedition. These included problems obtaining appropriate supplies (traps, rifles, proper packing material for shipment), and concerns for the safety of collections left in a central location while he continued to travel to distant field sites. His difficulties were compounded by long unproductive periods of waiting for the end of heavy rains in order to start collecting again.

Between the two Thailand expeditions, he returned to northern India (Ladakh and Kashmir) while ordering supplies and equipment to be sent to him for his return to Southeast Asia. His return was delayed by the outbreak of the Spanish-American War, for which he hastened back to the U.S.A., briefly visiting Washington and the Smithsonian in his rush to volunteer for the Cuban invasion in the "irregular" cavalry of his friend and fellow gentleman-scholar W.A. Chanler. He had decided by the time he returned to Singapore in December 1898, en route to his second trip to Thailand, to outfit a schooner in Singapore. This schooner, which he named the *Terrapin*, would later become his moveable base of natural history collecting operations primarily in the Indonesian archipelago for the ten years following his return to Singapore from the second Lower Siam expedition (thus until 1909). Abbott's second Thailand trip took place while he waited for the construction of his schooner to be finished.

19th-century "naturalists" or natural history collectors like Abbott can also be considered "proto-ethnographers" or "accidental ethnographers" (Taylor and Marino 2018), whose legacy collections and recorded observations can contribute to ethnographic knowledge today, though such travelers were untrained in any formal science of ethnography. The Abbott archives include two maps of his travels in Trang, reproduced here. The first (Figure 4) likely accompanied a 5 June 1897 letter to ornithologist Richmond describing his travels in Trang, enclosing what he referred to as his "sketch map of Trong [sic], with my collecting stations marked." He writes: "As is the case with the whole of the Siamese part of the Malay peninsula, the country is unsurveyed & unmapped. Although the country is populous and anything but a wilderness, it is terra incognita to Europeans." This sketch map was probably used to create a second map (Figure 5) also located among Abbott's papers.

Abbott found Trang to be a region of great cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity having a large Malay-speaking, Islamic population. These "Malays" lived alongside Siamese, Chinese, and a few Sikhs and "Eurasians," along with only a very few other "Europeans" along the coast. We cannot be sure of the locality within Trang where these musical instruments were collected. However the drums shown in Figures 6 and 7 include on their original handwritten labels a reference to their having been "obtained from Malays on coast." Abbott spent considerable time, and used as a collecting base, the village of Prahmon, at the mouth of the Trang River. This was a likely collecting locality, at least for material obtained from "Malays" on the coast.

## The musical instruments collected in 1896

The above brief summary of Abbott's visits to Trang in this period (cf. also Taylor 2014), establishes the context for Abbott's ethnographic and biological collecting there, and the range of his likely or possible collecting localities. In all, Abbott collected twelve locally used musical instruments described here: four drums, one bamboo gong, one small xylophone, two fiddles, three woodwind instruments (one oboe and two flutes), and one mouth harp.

Abbott's first expedition to Trang extended from February 1896 to April 1897. We know that all these instruments were collected in 1896 during the first half of his expedition, because they arrived together in a shipment sent to Washington from Penang via London, arriving at the Smithsonian on 2 November 1896, according to registrarial records (Accession no. 31341). Abbott's 15 July 1896 letter to the Smithsonian's Assistant Secretary G. Brown Goode noted that he had two weeks earlier shipped three cases of "Natural History specimens" including birds, mammals, reptiles, and insects. Among these specimens he also lists "ethnological objects" sent, including "various forms of fishing apparatus, and traps for fish, birds, and mammals, knives and choppers, krisses, drums and other musical instruments, and some specimens of cloth." From all this we can conclude that the musical instruments from Trang were probably all collected between February and June 1896. All the instruments show some wear-marks of prior usage. None appears newly made, they all seem to have been played.

In presenting these musical instruments here, I include the idiosyncratic transcription used by Abbott himself in providing the local names for these instruments. Undoubtedly based on an American English spelling system, these transcriptions give us only an approximation of how these speakers of the Thai or Malay dialect he was recording actually pronounced these terms.

Abbott merely used the word *tohn* as the local name for the cylindrical wooden drum (catalog no. E96,576)<sup>2</sup> shown in Figure 6a. On his handwritten label (Figures 6b, 6c) he recorded that this was "obtained from Malays on coast." Abbott himself could speak some Malay, and he referred to the primarily Malay-speaking population of Siam as "Malays"; in contrast to the "Siamese" and "Chinese" people of the same region. These inhabitants of the coastal, town, and rural farming communities of Trang were completely separate from the "Chow pah" or Negrito population of the Trang-Pattalung border area that he visited later in 1897 and 1899. The similarity of construction to the drum called *klong malayu*, produced in the Siamese court, has been noted above with reference to a pair of these courtly drums given by King Chulalongkorn to the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition in 1876 (see Figure 2c above; cf. Taylor and Smith 2017: 256, 258; cf. McQuail 1997: 122-123). Though Abbott left no records of village use, we know that within the Thai court tradition these *klong malayu* drums are used in pairs, as is the case also with the similarly constructed *klong khaek* drums (Morton

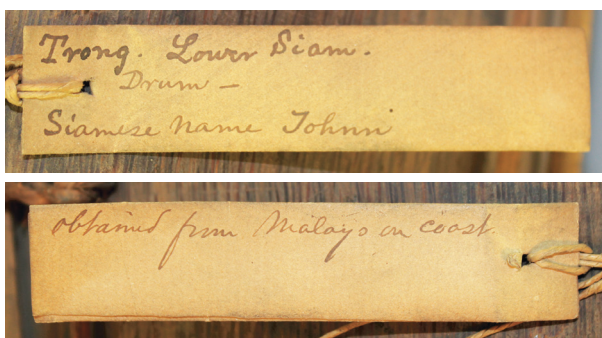
<sup>2</sup> Initially all anthropology catalog numbers were in one sequence; later the prefix "E" was added to catalog numbers in the Ethnology division, so 96,576 is the same as E96,576 which (if consisting of a single object not a set with numbered components) would be the same as E96,576-0.





Figure 6a. Two-headed cylindrical wooden drum, collected by W.L. Abbott in Trang (written “Trong”), 1896. Abbott’s handwritten label records this drum’s “Siamese name” as *Tohnn* (i.e. *ton*, “drum”), and notes on its reverse side that this drum was “obtained from Malays on coast.” [Local name, Dr. Natchanawakul interviews, Songkhla, 2019: *น้ Thn*] Catalog no. E96,576. 62.3 cm height x 24.4 cm diameter

Figures 6b, 6c. W.L. Abbott’s original handwritten field label (obverse and reverse), on drum shown in Figure 6a.



1976: 73; Taylor and Smith 2017: 254). Of the latter, one of the pair is considered female and the other male, played by separate musicians.

The instrument is used in pairs, with the two drums differing in pitch and played by separate musicians. The higher-pitched drum is referred to as the “male,” presumably because that pitch is considered more penetrating and authoritative; the lower-pitched one is the “female.” A complex line of rhythm is created by the intermingling and alternating of the sounds of the two parts. (Morton 1976: 73)

The fact that the paired *klong khaek* drums are also sometimes referred to as *klong chawa* (Javanese drum) seems evidence of the common idea that this type of drum construction originated in Java. Morton (ibid.) notes that similarly constructed paired drums are used in the performance of Javanese gamelan.

Thus it seems most likely that the drum shown in Figure 6a (“Tohnn”) is one of a pair, the other possibly being the one seen in Figure 7a, whose name was recorded on Abbott’s handwritten labels as “Tohn” – to which he helpfully added a message on pronunciation in parentheses, using an English word: “(Tone)” (Figures 7b). Abbott’s idiosyncratic writing of local names of objects, like his place names, had many variant spellings. As noted above, in August 2019 Dr. Nachaya Natchanawakul of Mahidol University interviewed Assistant Professor Dr. Ratchavit Musicarun and Assistant Prof. Thummanit Nikomrat at Songkhla regarding currently used names for this and the other instruments Abbott collected. As shown in the caption of Figure 6a, she found that the locally used Thai name for that drum is ทน (Thn), apparently the same as Abbott idiosyncratically recorded. The “oh” of his Tohnn is surely his American English attempt to make a long “o” sound. This is emphasized again in his handwritten label for the drum in Figure 7, whose label records the name as “Tohn (Tone)”.

Morton’s description of the *klong khaek* as having a “long cylindrical body of hardwood with heads of goatskin or calfskin” seems correct as well, although in the Trang examples (as in the Smithsonian’s drums from the royal court), the heads are held in place with an interlaced thong of plant fiber. Morton’s similarly constructed examples use leather thongs. Writing in 1976, Morton notes:

Originally the heads were held in place with cane or rattan split in half and tied widely apart; today, owing to the difficulty in obtaining good rattan and cane, leather thongs are used. (Morton 1976:73)

The drums Abbott collected in Trang, like the similarly constructed pairs of such cylindrical court drums given by King Mongkut as royal gifts in 1856 and those given in 1876 by King Chulalongkorn, used split cane or rattan. The Trang drum additionally has plant-fiber braces holding together the split cane or rattan thongs.

The Trang drum whose name Abbott recorded as “*Klongh*,” shown in Figure 8a-b, is the type of drum which Morton (1976: 72-75) refers to as *klong that*, noting that this type of drum seems to have been used in Thailand (as well as China) since ancient times, found now in many places throughout the country and with varying uses. He notes



Figure 7a. Two-headed cylindrical wooden drum, collected by W.L. Abbott in Trang (written “Trong”), 1896. Catalog no. E96,577. Abbott records the Siamese name “*Tohn (Tone)*”. [Local name, Dr. Natchanawakul interviews, Songkhla, 2019: *nu thn*] 62 cm height x 22.6 cm diameter.

Figures 7b. W.L. Abbott’s original handwritten field label on drum shown in Figure 7a.

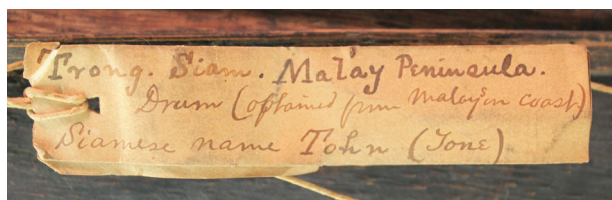






Figure 8a. Drum. Collected in Trang by W. L. Abbott, 1896. Abbott's handwritten label records this drum's "Siamese name" as simply *Klongh* (drum).

Catalog no. 96,578.

[Local name, Dr. Natchanawakul interviews, Songkhla, 2019: กลอง *klxng* or กลองโนรา *klxng norā*]

21 cm height x 20 cm diameter

Figure 8b. Original handwritten label for drum shown in Figure 8a.

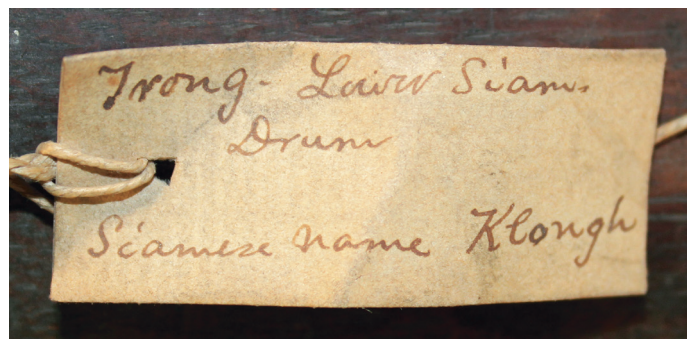


Figure 9. Left: Siam drum *klong yai yang Thai*. Gift of King Mongkut, 1856 Harris Treaty gifts. Catalog no. 68 (3947).

44 cm diameter X 46.2 cm height. Right: Siam drum *klong chana*. Gift of King Chulalongkorn, 1876 Centennial Exposition. Catalog no. 27257. 47 cm diameter X 51 cm height.



also (ibid.: 74-75) that the drum is made from a solid block hollowed out of hardwood. The heads are made of cowhides or water buffalo hides and are fastened to the sides of the drum using metal pegs. Before a performance, a pasty mixture of rice and ashes is applied to one of the heads. This head then faces towards the ground as the drum is placed on a padded ring that anchors the instrument, and the drum is tilted towards the player and held in place by two poles inserted through an attached metal ring in the middle of the body. He also notes that in some places such drums “are hung or suspended, while in others they are laid on the side on a stand so that both heads may be played.” (ibid.: 75)

Here again we find the rural Thai village “version” of this instrument appearing also in a modified form in the Thai royal court. The Smithsonian collection contains two such examples, one drum given to U.S. President Franklin Pierce in 1856 by King Mongkut (Rama IV) and another given by King Chulalongkorn (Rama V) for the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition in 1876 (see Figure 9; cf. Taylor & Smith 2017: 255-258 for further explanation). In all cases, the structure is fundamentally the same, however the courtly variant – even in this instrument whose sound quality is dependent on the fundamentally same hardwood and tympanum materials, has an increased amount and quality of the costlier metal component. Note the far more numerous and regular cupreous metal rivets holding the tympanum in place, whereas the Trang drum has fewer, and more irregularly made and placed rivets holding the tympanum at the top. The Trang drum of 1896 compensates for that by using a twisted plant-fiber brace to hold the tympanum in place, something not needed in the court version from 1856 nor from 1876. In all cases, the Smithsonian acquired only one drum from each of these sources, though this type of drum is, according to Morton (1976: 76), now generally played in pairs.

Later, King Chulalongkorn separately gave another royal gift of musical instruments for display at the 1885 International Inventions Exhibition held in South Kensington, London; these were cataloged in Verney’s (1885) important early study of Siamese musical instruments. He included a pair of similar drums with the Siamese name *klong yai*, one of which is shown in Figure 10 (from Verney 1885: 19). In this royal gift, unlike the 1876 example in the Smithsonian collections, Verney records an overlay of ornamentation made of precious materials comparable to those we see in other courtly versions of traditional Thai instruments, like the Smithsonian’s hand drum seen in Figure 1b above. Verney writes, of the drum shown in Figure 10, that the “outside of the [drum’s] case, which is of the cask pattern, is coated with mother-of-pearl and enamel. These drums are tilted slightly, so as to be easily



Figure 10. “Klong Yai” drum, royal gift from King Chulalongkorn to the 1885 International Inventions Exhibition held in South Kensington, London, as illustrated in Verney 1885: 19.

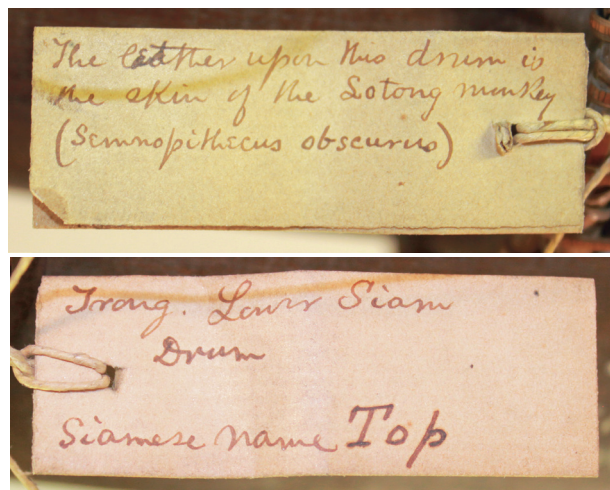


Figure 11a. Drum. Collected in Trang by W. L. Abbott, 1896. Abbott's handwritten label records this drum's "Siamese name" as *Top*. Catalog no. E96,579.

[Local name, Dr. Natchanawakul interviews, Songkhla, 2019: หัว *thab*]

39.5 cm height x 25 cm head diameter x 11 cm body diameter

Figures 11b, 11c. Original handwritten label for drum shown in Figure 11a (obverse, reverse). Abbott notes "The leather upon this drum is the skin of the Lotong monkey (*Semnopithecus obscurus*)" referring to the langur known today as *Trachypithecus obscurus* (see text).



played by one performer with a drumstick in each hand, like our kettle-drums. They have a sweet musical tone. They are tuned by placing or sticking a handful of mashed boiled rice at the bottom of the drum” (Verney 1885: 19).

A very different hand drum is shown in Figures 11a-c. Dr. Natchanawakul’s interviewees indicate that today the name given in Trang to this instrument is: *thab* (Thai ทับ), which is clearly the same term Abbott recorded with his idiosyncratic romanization, in his original field label: “Siamese name **Top**”. Assistant Professors Dr. Ratchavit Musicarun and Dr. Thummanit Nikomrat noted (August 2019) that this instrument, the *thab*, is usually played as a paired set (one considered male and one female), and that in the past each *thab* was played by a single person, whereas today one person usually plays both *thab* in the set of two.

Morton (1976: 76) illustrates a seemingly identical drum for which he gives the Thai name *thōn chātrī*, referring to this as a single-headed drum that may have origins in the Middle East. However he also states that the head of the *thōn chātrī* drum is made of buffalo hide. By contrast, Abbott’s handwritten label for this drum (Figures 11b, 11c) notes that: “The leather upon this drum is the skin of the Lotong monkey (*Semnopithecus obscurus*)” referring to the langur species that has since that time been placed in a different genus, now known as *Trachypithecus obscurus* (Osterholz et al., 2008). In standard Malay this langur is known as *lutung* but *o* and *u* frequently co-vary in Malay dialects; Abbott did speak some Malay so rather than indicating a spelling error, probably the dialect he heard in Trang used “*lotong*.”

Morton also notes that the shape of this drum is often referred to as a “goblet” or “inverted vase.” He adds: “The drum is used in the south in pairs (one player to a drum) to accompany the southern form of theater, the *lakhōn nōrā*, and the shadow play.” (1976:76).

As shown above in Figures 1a-b, the simple beauty of this wooden, rattan and skin drum contrasts with the courtly version which is beautifully decorated with glass and metal – and which, again according to Morton (1976:76-77) is known as the *thōn mahōri* due to its use within the *mahōri* ensemble of instruments. The royal gift hand drum from 1876 seen in Figure 1b is a good example, with a similar underlying hand drum structure and shape, yet elaborated with intricate designs of colored glass, mirror, and metal (rather than plant fibers as in the Trang hand drum), with a snakeskin head. The decorated, courtly *thōn mahōri* is also played paired with another drum. Yet while the “southern” hand drum is paired with a second hand drum of the same shape and kind (ibid.), the Thai court’s *thōn mahōri* is instead paired with a shallow frame drum known as the *rammana* (Morton 1976: 77; Taylor and Smith 2017: 268-270).

A historically interesting item which Abbott collected in Trang and considered a “musical instrument” consists of a section of bamboo with its ends closed at the joints, having a narrow slot carved into one side between the joints. Abbott labels this a “bamboo gong” (Figures 12a-b), but records no local name. Henry Balfour’s (1904) report on a collection of musical instruments from “the Siamese Malay States and Perak” illustrates a similar instrument (Figure 13), which surely explains the small flange projecting out to the right in the photo of the Trang instrument (Figure 12a). That flange was probably used to attach a similar wooden striker via a cord, though both the cord and striker are





Figure 12a. Bamboo gong. Collected in Trang by W. L. Abbott, 1896.  
Catalog No. 96,580.  
41.5 cm length x 8.6 cm diameter

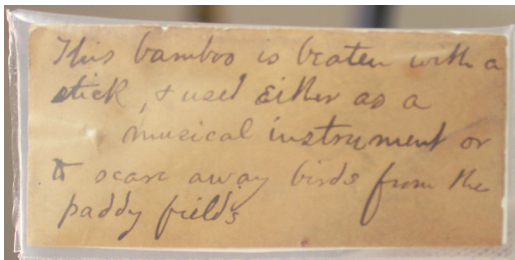


Figure 12b. Abbott's original handwritten label (preserved in the museum's plastic sleeve) for bamboo gong shown in Figure 12a. Abbott's handwritten label records that: "This bamboo is beaten with a stick, and used either as a musical instrument or to scare away birds from the paddy fields"

Figure 13. *Bamboo Gong*, as illustrated in Balfour (1904: 3), with caption: "Malay name, *kalah*. Malay and Siamese. Kompong Jalor."

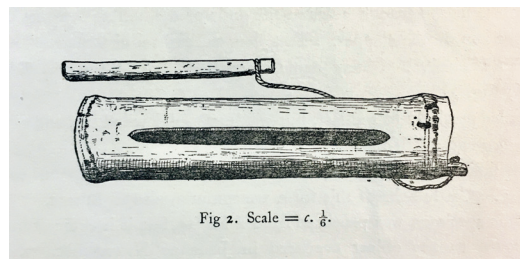


Fig 2. Scale = c.  $\frac{1}{8}$ .

now missing (if they were even present when this object was first collected). Balfour describes this instrument as follows:

A section of stout bamboo, eighteen and a half inches long, closed by a node at each end. Along one side runs a longitudinal, slit-like opening, twelve inches by nine-sixteenths inch, the bamboo is slightly engraved. The wooden striker is attached by a cord to a flange projecting at one end. Malays travelling at night often carry one of these bamboo gongs, which they strike when uncertain as to the way. The people in the nearest village reply. In some districts of the Patani states the use of the *kalah* is restricted to the *nai-ban* and *kem-nan* (heads of tens and hundreds), who summon their followers with it in case of fire, robbery or the like. Similar gongs are used by the guards on the birds'-nest islands of the Taleh Sap, where



each sentinel is obliged to strike his gong every hour through the night, the signal being taken up by the next watcher, and so on all round the island. In the Patani States the end of the rounds at cock-fighting was formerly announced by means of a kalah, but a Chinese metal gong is now commonly employed. Such gongs of bamboo are common in the Asiatic region, the Malayan Islands, and parts of the Pacific. (Balfour 1904: 3-4).

Yupho also includes a sketch drawing of a similar instrument (Yupho 1960: 6), for which he gives the Thai name “*gràw*”:

The *gràw*, one of the oldest Thai instruments, is usually made from a section of bamboo which is cut in such a way that a node or joint of the bamboo is retained at each end of the section. A small slit is made in the side of the section running the length of the cylindrical column between the nodes. The *gràw* is played by hitting the section of bamboo with a small beater which is made of another piece of bamboo or a piece of hardwood. The instrument is held in one hand, the beater in the other, and is played by beating or tapping the beater against the instrument. This is the way it was originally done for signalling or telling the time. There is an old Thai saying which refers to this instrument: ‘Beat the *gràw*, tap the wood.’ Sometimes holes are bored through both end nodes of the bamboo and a string or leather thong is passed through so that it may be carried horizontally. Sometimes three or four smaller pieces are tied and hung inside the main bamboo section, and when it is struck or shaken, it acts as a signal bell suitable for calling students to school and such similar situations. The size of the *gràw* depends upon the need and the size of the bamboo which can be found, but usually a large size of bamboo is used, and the bigger the size that can be found, the better, because a larger size, when struck, can be heard at a greater distance. But the *gràw*, it appears, was never used in musical ensembles, only for telling time or calling the watches at night. Today, in performances of plays – *khǒ·n* and *lakhaw·n* – this instrument is used in the parts where the stage army is encamped. In the old days the headman of a village also used it as a signal to warn of danger or to call a meeting of the villagers.” (Yupho 1960: 6-7)

So it seems that literature on southern Thai musical instruments helps us interpret the silent collection that Abbott assembled from Trang over 100 years ago; yet this collection also provides a new source of information supplementing these relatively few literary sources. Abbott’s small handwritten label provides a detail on the contemporaneous usage of this object, when he writes: “This bamboo is beaten with a stick, & used either as a musical instrument or to scare away birds from the paddy fields.” The usage of this instrument to scare away birds in rice-fields seems not to have been recorded. It is possible that more information might be obtained by taking these and other historic images into Trang villages and inquiring about local memories. It is interesting that Dr. Nachaya Natchanawakul’s August 2019 inquiries about this object to university professors of southern Thai music at Songkhla, in August 2019, noted that

this object is today termed *kerāa* or *graw* (Thai: เกราะ), used for sending signals, not as part of any musical ensemble. Thus it probably would not today be considered a musical instrument, as both Abbott and Yupho had termed it.

Abbott also collected in Trang the small xylophone shown in Figure 14. Using that photograph, Dr. Natchanawakul's August 2019 interviews in Songkhla elicited the folk name for this instrument, *hòmmng fāk* (Thai: โหม่งฟาก), and that this southern Thai instrument is now used for a dance called the Norah dance. This Smithsonian example has a clear place and date of collection (Trang, 1896), along with Abbott's confirmation it was in use in Trang at that time. The instrument consists of an open wooden box with high diverging ends. Two thin flat pieces of iron are suspended by plant-fiber cords stretched from end to end over the box. Those two iron keys are struck with a knobbed drum stick.

There is in Smithsonian archives some correspondence with Abbott about this item, when Smithsonian mammologist Frederick William True acknowledged the Museum's receipt of the collections Abbott had sent:

I hardly know how to express our gratitude for this further substantial evidence of your generosity and good will. Professor Mason informs me that the ethnological objects in both of your late sendings were received in fine condition, and that some of them are already on exhibition. If you should happen to know whether the musical instrument—Kong-Rangh—has more than two metal bars, will you kindly mention it in your next letter. (F.W. True to W.L. Abbott, 22 March 1897)

Abbott responded to True in a letter from Penang dated 7 May 1897:

As to the musical instrument, the Kong-Rangh, which you mentioned in your letter. I never saw one with more than 2 iron bars, though there may be more sometimes. Often there is only one bar. Natives are not particular in such matters, noise is the principal thing which is wanted.

It is interesting that Abbott, while stating “there may be more [bars] sometimes” also stated “I never saw one with more than 2 iron bars.” In fact, there is visibly enough slack in the suspending strings to add bars on this example he collected. Abbott's locally recorded name is unrelated to the currently used name as reported in August 2019. Still, his untrained transcription “*khong rang*” might be explained as Thai “*khong*” meaning “gong”; and perhaps “*rang*” (if falling tone) indicating a rail (as of a fence), thus indicating a gong-like instrument suspended from a “rail”-like suspension (Thai *khong rang* โหม่ง ฟาก) – but this is only a speculative etymology for this phrase recorded in 1896.

Abbott's collection from Trang also includes two fiddles, seen in Figures 15 and 16. These two objects have long suffered from the kind of cataloging confusion that besets many legacy collections. Both have recently been re-cataloged, labeled and stored differently as a result of research for the present article. The reason for the confusion is that in the 19th century, the Smithsonian's original handwritten ledger book (into which



Figure 14. Small xylophone, with Siamese name Kong-rang as recorded by W.L. Abbott. Collected in Trang by W.L. Abbott, 1896. Catalog no. E96,581.

[Local name, Dr. Natchanawakul interviews, Songkhla, 2019: hōmng fāk (Thai: โหม่งฟัก)]

Body (wood): 38.1 cm length x 9.2 cm width x 16.6 cm height. Keys (metal): 13.9 cm length x 40 cm width

Mallet (wood) 22.5 cm length x 2.1 cm diameter



Figure 15. Fiddle and bow. Collected in Trang by W. L. Abbott, 1896. Abbott recorded the Siamese name as *hee-an-ah*. Catalog No. 96,582-1.

45.2 cm length x 9.4 cm shell diameter x 3.7 cm head width



Figure 16. Fiddle and bow. Collected in Trang by W. L. Abbott, 1896.

Abbott recorded the Siamese name as *hee-an-ah*. Catalog No. 96,582-

72.3 cm length x 15 cm shell diameter

each new collection object got recorded) contained a single handwritten line item for both fiddles (and their bows).<sup>3</sup>

Figure 15 shows one fiddle and bow set of the two from Trang in 1896, for which Abbott recorded the Siamese name as *hee-an-ah* (Catalog No. 96,582-1). The body is made of coconut shell; the neck is a cylindrical stick passing through the body. The fiddle is strung with two silk strings with wire tuning pegs. The bow is a tapering piece of bamboo decreasing toward the top, which is bent, strung with nine cotton threads.

Figure 16 shows the second fiddle with its bow, also having the same name *hee-an-ah* (Catalog No. 96,582-0, formerly Catalog No. 96,582-2). The body consists of about two-thirds of a coconut shell, with a belly of thin skin laced through holes in its edge to a hoop of twisted split rattan around the lower part of the body. The lacing is also of split rattan. The neck, which passes through the body, has an open rectangular peg box fitted with three transverse tuning pegs. In Dr. Natchanawakul's August 2019 interviews at Songkhla, these fiddles (Figs. 15, 16) were not recognized as musical instruments that are locally made.<sup>4</sup>

Abbott's collection from Trang also includes three examples of woodwind instruments. Abbott and/or early catalogers called all of these "flutes" which however is a term sometimes loosely or colloquially (musicians say incorrectly) applied to any wind instrument made from a tube with holes along it that are stopped by the fingers. The first of these to be discussed here is a quadruple-reed oboe – or what has commonly been termed as "double reed oboes" even though as Morton (1976: 81) explains the reed "is actually quadruple being made of four small roundish pieces of dried palm leaf placed in two double layers and tied to a small tube." It is very understandable that Abbott, unfamiliar with musical instruments, could not distinguish between "oboe" and "flute" so he does refer to this on his label as a "flute". Nevertheless, as seen in Figure 17a, this is a circular-breathing aerophone with a post (or "tube" – here a short piece of

<sup>3</sup> This was likely a simple error as other pairs of items that are of the same type and have the same name generally were allotted a separate line for each item. For example, within this collection of musical instruments are two "tohn" drums, as well as two "kluey" flutes, and in both cases each separate item is allotted a line in the ledger and an individual catalog number. Indeed, within the "remarks" column in the ledger for E96582, the following is noted in handwritten text, perhaps long after the error was discovered: "96582-2 was not entered at the time 96582-1 was." To correct for this initial error, "-1" and "-2" were added directly below the line item for E96582, thereby creating the catalog numbers E96582-1 and E96582-2, both of which are listed as "Hee-an-ah" and share in the ledger book the single line originally allocated for a single item, E96582. As the dimensions are included in the ledger entry, we can surmise that E96582-1 was the shorter of the two instruments and E96582-2 is the longer.

Subsequently, at some point (possibly during the initial move of the records to a digital database in the 1980s) the number E96582-2 was replaced with E96582-0, which the object currently has. Adding to the confusion surrounding these fiddles, during the move to the Smithsonian's off-site storage facility known as the Museum Support Center (in the 1980s and early 1990s), both bows for both instruments were stored alongside E96582-0 (formerly E96582-2), in a quite different area of the facility than E96582-1. Fortunately, that original ledger listed the dimensions for the bows associated with each of the two fiddles, so from this information, this author has recently corrected the catalog numbering for the two fiddles and their bows, and reunited each fiddle with its correct bow.

<sup>4</sup> The "Siamese name" of the two fiddles, *hee-an-ah* (as recorded by Abbott), indicates Chinese influence. The online "English-Hokkien Dictionary" defines *hiân-á* (胡琴) as "Chinese fiddle, two-string violin" (see <http://niawdeleon.com/hokkien-dictionary/> – search term "violin")





Figure 17a. Oboe, originally labeled by Abbott a “Flute”; “Siamese name Pay”. Collected in Trang by W. L. Abbott, 1896. Catalog No. 96,583. [Local name, Dr. Natchanawakul interviews, Songkhla, 2019: *pī* (Thai: พิ)]. 31.1 cm length x 2.5 cm diameter

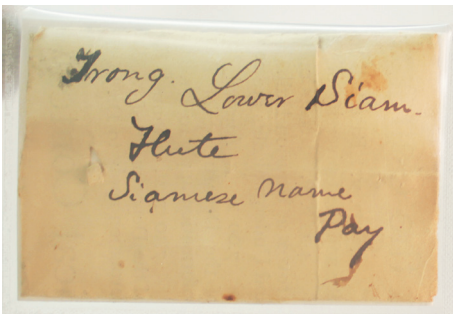


Figure 17b. Abbott's original handwritten label for the oboe (mistakenly labeled “Flute”) shown in Figure 17a.

bamboo cemented into the upper end with wax) for affixing quadruple reeds. Thus this is not a flute.

This oboe has six bored holes in the cylinder, which seem to have been made with a burning iron, consistent again with Morton's observation (1976: 80) that other traditional Thai *pi* (oboes) have six holes whereas Morton notes (1976: 77) that *khlui* (flutes) – as shown in Figures 18 and 19 below – have seven finger holes. In Dr. Natchanawakul's August 2019 interviews at Songkhla, the photograph shown in Figure 17a was recognized as *pī* (Thai: พิ), validating Abbott's idiosyncratic Romanization *pay*. The *pi* or oboe is an important instrument for traditional Thai music ensembles, and courtly versions were present within 19th-century Thai royal gifts to the United States of America as well (Taylor and Smith 2017: 252-255).

The second and third woodwind instruments (Figures 18, 19) both had the local name recorded as “*kluay*” and are properly flutes as this Thai name implies (see below). Yupho observed, for these two instruments:

The *khlui* is probably the first wind instrument which the Thai devised themselves, although the shape of the instrument is very similar to that of the *mú ra·li·* [...] of India, which is used to play music in worship of Krishna, one of the Hindu gods” (Yupho 1960: 67).

Yupho further describes the instrument's construction:

In the old days the *khlui* was made of a long length of one variety of bamboo, cut so that there would be a node 2.5 cm. (1”) from the lower end. This node, however,

was pierced so that there was an open shaft throughout the entire length of the instrument. This is still the basic model used today. After cutting and hollowing, the instrument is carefully dried out over fire during which procedure a process is used whereby designs are made on the bamboo by the heat. This makes the instrument less bare and more attractive.” (Yupho 1960: 67)

Such a pattern, formed by firing against a resist on the bamboo surface, can be seen in the flute in Figure 18. By contrast, the flute shown in Figure 19, having the same local name, has little decoration. The pattern of lines may result from the fact that lines were incised as a marker of where to place the holes. This may be a finished example, but perhaps this flute was collected while still unfinished. In that case, the lines might also mark places into which the decorative patterns like those seen on the other flute in Figure 18 would later have been placed.

Abbott also collected in Trang one mouth harp of a very distinctive shape, apparently made of bamboo, with a red cotton textile casing which adheres to it with an adhesive (probably resin) (see Figure 20a-c). This object was cataloged at the Smithsonian with the English name “Jewsharp” (Jew’s harp), the term used also by Prince Damrong (1931) in his descriptions of this instrument in Thailand, and by Brandt (1961: 144) who described its use among Negrito populations of the Malay peninsula.

This instrument had already become rare in Thailand by the time Prince Damrong published his study of Siamese musical instruments in 1931, in which he observed:

There is also another musical instrument which was formerly a favourite with the Siamese. I am not sure whether it is our own or we have adopted it from some other people. It is a kind of Jew’s harp called ‘Chong Nong’. It is made of bamboo and provided with a tongue which can be twanged with the hand or vibrated by means of a twine fastened to it. The performer holds the instrument in his mouth, twangs or vibrates its tongue, puffs his cheeks, and breathes the required variations of tone upon it. It can produce melody and is played solo. They say that the lover played the ‘Chong Nong’ outside his lady’s house as a sign. Now no one uses it. I suspect that the instrument is exotic since I have seen small musical instruments of the same kind, made of iron called ‘Pia Lek’ which has long been on the market. (Damrong 1931: 10)

Abbott must have recorded its original local name as *yang-óng* with the accented “o” likely indicating stress on the second syllable. There is currently no original handwritten label associated with this object in the collection storage. However at some point Abbott must have labeled it and recorded its local name, because “*yang-óng*” appears in the “Name” column on the earliest handwritten ledger listing collection items received. So that record survives though this object’s original handwritten label was apparently lost after it arrived in the collection.

Handwritten collector annotations “Trong” and “Lower Siam”, as well as the catalog number applied by the Museum, are however visible on the flat surface of the mouth harp. The same surface bears an enigmatic inscription having twelve characters



Figure 18. Flute. Collected in Trang by W.L. Abbott, 1896. Abbott recorded the “Siamese name” as “*kluey*”.



Figure 19. Flute. Collected in Trang by W.L. Abbott, 1896. Abbott recorded the “Siamese name” as “*kluey*”.  
Catalog No. 96,585.  
27.6 cm length x 1.8 cm diameter



Figure 20a. Bamboo mouth harp. Collected in Trang by W.L. Abbott, 1896.  
Catalog records indicate Abbott recorded “the Siamese name” as *yang-óng*.  
Catalog No. 96,586. Photo: Smithsonian Institution.  
26.1 cm length x 9 mm maximum diameter



Figure 20b. Mouth harp shown in Figure 20a (flat surface view). “Chinese” inscription (see text) is at left. Photo: Smithsonian Institution.



Figure 20c. “Chinese” inscription (see text) on mouth harp shown in Figure 20a-b.

visible on it, as seen in Figure 20b. At least eight of the characters are Chinese, though likely written by someone quite unfamiliar with writing Chinese, and their meanings are obscure. A few – such as the bottom three in the left column – are unlike Chinese characters.

In Figure 20c, these characters are shown as they would presumably be read, in two columns from top right to bottom right then top left to bottom left. This author is very grateful to Dr. Kirby Vining for assistance with this inscription; he notes that the third character is clearly the Chinese word for year (年); making it likely that this along with the prior two characters form a date in the sexagenary cycle, possibly a date of manufacture. These first three characters (at top of the right column) are thus most likely attempts to write the Chinese sexagenary cycle terms 庚辰年 which would refer to 1760, 1820, 1880, etc. in 60-year intervals (thus presumably “1880” here, given that this was collected in 1896). Overall, however, he notes that this writing appears to have been done by someone who was nearly illiterate in Chinese or perhaps entirely illiterate and trying to copy words in an inscription format (without proper stroke order, for example). Possibly the writer/copyist could not understand what was being written. We may speculate on various scenarios of manufacture. Perhaps, for example, a Chinese inscription was copied onto this instrument by its local (perhaps even non-Chinese?) maker, to give it the appearance of having a more prestigious foreign (Chinese) origin. However, the meaning of this inscription and the context of this instrument’s manufacture are not known.

Hopefully the limited amount of information presented here about these twelve musical instruments collected by one collector, who found them in use in Trang in 1896, can be supplemented by comparison with other collections. An additional useful source of information would be fieldwork bringing images like those included here back to today’s descendants of the people who originally made or used such objects. Such efforts should invite today’s descendants of the people Abbott visited in southern Thailand to become involved in interpreting within their own histories the objects, photographs, and archival narratives found in legacy collections of museums and archives worldwide.



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