The fun of comparison is that it turns the familiar into the unfamiliar. It forces us to re-consider what we think we understand. So it is for me. A recent trip to Cambodia led, by luck, to the storeroom of the National Museum in Phnom Penh. The Museum is, for those who have not been there, a colonial "take" on traditional Khmer architecture by its designer, the extraordinary George Groslier. A tragic figure, tortured to death by Japanese troops, Groslier did much for the country where he was born, doing pioneering research in all aspects of Khmer civilization. As if that were not enough, he founded the Royal University of Fine Arts. Among his many interests, Groslier was fascinated by classical Khmer dance and music. In fact, the University was founded in part to preserve that tradition. The museum still holds many of his black-and-white photographs, documenting, if I remember correctly, close to 2500 distinct poses of dance (photographs by Groslier).

Our kind host, Bertrand Porte, local representative of the École Française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO), spoke about the ordeals of Cambodian sculpture, showing us pieces that could be repatriated and reconstituted after their theft from the country. Then, to my surprise, he pulled a cloth away from a rather bulky object. Underneath lay a set of large "lithophones," stones which, when struck, clang and resonate (Figure 1). Their varying size and how they were struck affect pitch and sonority, much like gamelan percussion in other parts of southeast Asia.
Such lithophones have been known for some time, if largely from Vietnam. The most influential study remains that of George Condominas, a figure renowned for his ethnology of the M’Nông people of Vietnam and his early use of terms like “ethnocide.” Marlon Brando and Martin Sheen would probably not know it, but his recording of M’Nông music enlivens the final scene of mayhem and butchery in Apocalypse Now (soundtrack). A set of such lithophones was found in orderly pattern, c. 1947, at the site of Ndut Lien Krak, about 350 km due east from Phnom Penh (Condominas 1952: fig. 42). The material is a metamorphic schist, and the dating somewhat unclear. Condominas, an associate of André Leroi-Gourhan, wanted them to be old indeed, many millennia in the past. The intervals of this set were worked out a bit earlier by André Schaeffner (1951: 16–17; see also Trần Văn Khê 1982: 233). Subsequent finds, the only ones in secure context, seem to narrow the date to about 500 to 1000 BC and perhaps some centuries before (Trần Văn Khê 1982: 226). All share certain features. The blades (lames) are oblong, mostly rectangular, with rounded ends (Trần Văn Khê 1982: 226). Only a few sets have been found. One scholar goes so far as to wonder if they were truly played in a group, like a xylophone, or struck individually. But they were certainly found clumped together, including a fortuitous discovery brought to light during bulldozing at the outset of the Vietnam war. In his superb book on Angkorian civilization, Michael Coe specifies a more precise date of c. 1240 BC, from a better-studied context at the Groslier site near Memot, on the border between Vietnam and Cambodia (Coe 2003: 52). He also mentions that “a few are still in use by aboriginal Mon–Khmers in the highlands in ceremonies that include rainmaking or buffalo sacrifice” (ibid: 52, citing unpublished work by Pham Duc Manh; see also Albrecht et al. 2001: 41, 42, pl. II). A few are shown here from Ndut Lien Krak (Figure 2), followed by one of the stones in various profiles (Figure 3). Note the lateral knapping and impressive size.
Today, it appears that the Vietnamese delight in this (reinvented?) legacy, devising lithophones for more ambitious performances. Take a moment to listen:

Since that discovery, lithophones have been attested in Africa, including several in fixed position, massive boulders to be struck with hands or mallets (Fagg 1956:pl. b). Smaller, portable ones occur throughout the Sahara (Gonthier 2005). Particularly refined examples come from dynastic China, which have explicit notations on them about notes and where to strike (Bagley 2004; von Falkenhausen 1994). A persuasive and well-researched review of evidence from New England finds rounded lithophones that were formerly interpreted as “whetstones” or food-processing equipment (Caldwell 2013:520). The Cherokee, too, were said to have used “stone turtles” as drums (James Mooney, cited by Caldwell 2013:522).

A year or two ago, Karl Taube speculated to me that the Maya might have had lithophones. I vaguely recall James Brady making the same point years ago, but in that instance about stone features in caves.

I agree. We may well have been overlooking them, especially near the great chert deposits of northern Belize. An array of recent finds reveals “macroliths” (large knapped stones) that look eerily like those in the National Museum of Phnom Penh and those from Vietnam. These include blades from Hats Kaab, Belize (Brouwer Burg et al. 2016:fig. 9).
Jaime Awe and his colleagues have been no less assiduous in reporting on massive blades from elsewhere in Belize (Stemp et al. 2014:figs. 2, 3), including an imposing example from El Chiquero in the Upper Macal River Valley (Figures 5–6; Stemp et al. 2015:fig. 1; see also a rich tomb at Tamarindito, in which a ruler, ready for music-making, clasps a macroblade to his chest; Valdés 1997:fig. 9). Some may occur in caves, also studied by Awe, as at Actun Tunichil Muknal (Awe et al. 2005:figs. 9.5–9.7). Such tight spaces would have obvious properties as echo-chambers.
I now suspect that not all of these were knapped. In their peerless excavations at Aguateca, Takeshi Inomata and Daniela Triadan uncovered, in royal contexts, rectangular objects that might well have been struck by mallets. Inomata observes that they were "relatively smooth, but not completely flat, surfaces and do not seem to have been used for grinding" (Inomata 2014: 76, fig. 5.42, a, b). If archaeologist look again, they may well detect similar objects, some of which might have been gongs. I have long thought, for example, that Maya belt celts should be evaluated for their phonic properties. Clearly, they were meant to move and hit one another.

There is long-standing debate about whether the celebrated Maya marimba came from Africa. Tikal Burial 10, thought by some to belong to Yax Nuun Ahin, an important Early Classic ruler, has a set of three turtle carapaces in a row, mounted between two sticks (Coe 1990: fig. 160). For others, however, the matter is settled. There is the word itself, marimba, which is of evident Bantu origin, and the use of gourd or wooden resonators, also African in inspiration (origin). But this is not the same as insisting that the Maya had no such instruments, no tradition of sonorous music from stone.

Postscript: My good colleague, Andrew Scherer, sends me to the following: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aA6duGBMeWA. Lithophones are, it seems, everywhere, and, in stray stones, everywhere to be found.

Acknowledgments

Karl Taube got me thinking about this over a year go, and Zachary Hruby is now undertaking amusing experiments that point to even more varied instrumentation. Mike Coe drew my attention to the dating mentioned in his fine book on Khmer civilization. My trip to Cambodia was facilitated by good friends John Bodel and Michèle Brunet through their Visible Words initiative.

References


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