

The gambus (lutes) of the Malay world: its origins and significance in zapin Music

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Abstract

In this paper I will briefly discuss how I came to study with John Blacking at Queen's University of Belfast in 1987. I will also discuss accounts of Blacking's stay in British Malaya and Singapore since the late 1940's and early 1950's. This information on his arrival in the Malay Peninsular was articulated to me by Dr. and Mrs. Ivan Polunin, very close associates of Blacking when he was an assistant adviser on aborigines (Orang *Asli*) to the British Military forces. Blacking had mentioned to me that his first love was the people and music of Peninsular Malaya. As he did not manage to fulfil his research into this area, I feel privileged to be able contribute to the studies done on this region.

I will then explore the main focus of this paper, which is the appearance of two types of lute instruments commonly known as the "*gambus*" in the Malay Archipelago. The main focus will be on the historical development of the different variants of *gambus*. This paper will examine the controversies surrounding the "transmission" and "migration" of the *gambus*-type instruments into the Malay world. I will also discuss how these instruments are identified today as symbols of Islam and Melayu "*ness*".

The importance of the relationship between the music and dance (*zapin*), and the role of the *gambus* as a key instrument in *zapin* will be discussed. The performance of the two *zapin* dance forms: *Melayu* and *Arab* will be demonstrated with the aid of video images. I will also examine the differences between the two styles of *zapin* and explore some aspects of its musical characteristics.

The Plucked-lutes of the Malay world

In the beginning, my research was focused on one type of *gambus* (arched-back), as I was unaware of the existence of the pear-shaped lute. When I first came across the pear-shaped lute my impression was that this instrument looked completely different and had nothing in common with the *gambus* of the arched-back type [see Fig. 1 *gambus Hadhramaut* (a) and *gambus Melayu* (b)]. However, I later found that both types of plucked-lute instrument were interchangeable in the

performance of *zapin* and *ghazal* which are the two important Malay music genres.¹ This led to my belief that they are inseparable and it became necessary to investigate both types of lute instruments as both types were engaged to play the role as the main instrument in *zapin* and *ghazal*, although never played together in the same ensemble.

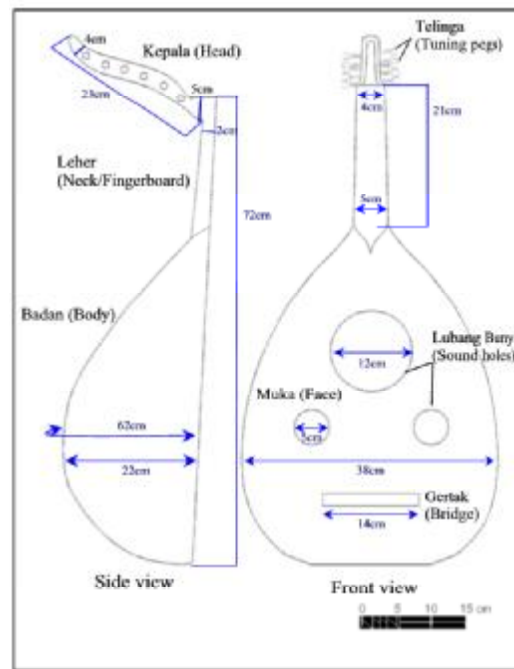
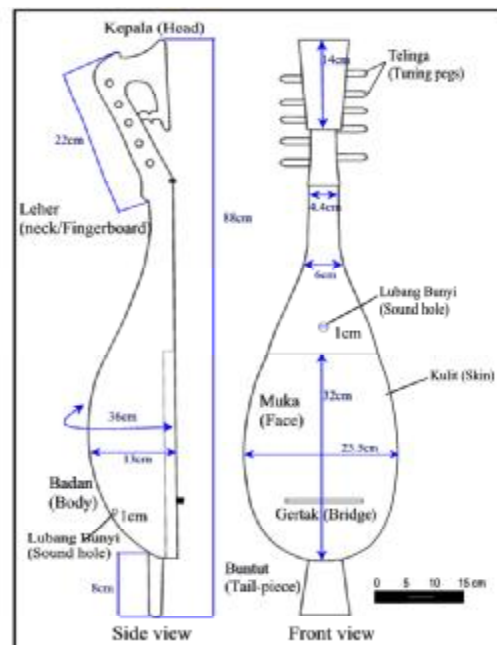


Fig.1
(a) The *Gambus Hadhramaut*



¹ The *zapin* is an Arabian influenced musical genre and *ghazal* is Indian in its musical characteristics. The *gambus* is the lead melodic instrument for both genres.

(b) *The Gambus Melayu*

Today, *gambus* playing is mainly identified with the whole of *alam Melayu* (Malay world) as this instrument is identified with Melayu tradition (see Map 1).

Map 1



Malay Archipelago and *alam Melayu* (the Malay world)

The Early Migration of the *Gambus*-Type Instruments

There are various “theories” as to how *gambus Melayu* and *gambus Hadhramaut* arrived in the Malay Archipelago. One hypothesis is that the arrival of *gambus* is attributed to the Arabs during the Islamization of Melaka in the 15th century (Anis 1993:20). The hypotheses I am propounding is that the Persians and the Arabs were trading in the Malay Archipelago as early as the 9th century and these instruments could have been carried on board their ships for personal entertainment on long voyages. The *barbat*, *qanbus* and ‘*ud* which closely resembles the *gambus* could have been introduced by these traders when trading along the Malay Archipelago. The earliest western documented source that I have come across in English, recorded the word “*gambus*” was by Sachs in *The History of Musical Instruments* (1940: 251-252).²

² Sachs was probably the first European scholar to have used the word “*gambus*” in his 1913 German publication of “*Reallexikon der Musikinstrumente*” (p.152) Georg Olm Verlagsbuchhandlung Hildesheim 1964 Nachdruck der Ausgabe, Berlin 1913 mit Genehmigung des Verlag Max Hesse, Berlin. Kunst used the word “*gambus*” in an article in 1934, describing the *gambus* as a plucked pear-shaped lute. He concluded that the *gambus* is fairly common throughout the entire archipelago in strict Islamic areas. Kunst described it as having seven strings: three double strung pairs and one low single string (1934). In another article by Kunst it was also mentioned that its (*gambus*) country of origin was the Hadhramaut region of Yemen where it is known as *quopuz*. This article appeared in “*Two Thousand Years of South*

“[Lute-types instruments] carved out of a single piece of wood with no distinct neck and tapering towards the pegbox, are found first in Iran (Persia), the same country which afterwards became their centre; Elamic clay figures attributed to the 8th century B.C. show them in rough outlines; the strings and their attachment are not distinguishable.Islam migration and conquests carried this lute eastwards from Persia as far as Celebes (Sulawesi) and southwards to Madagascar. In all these countries it has been called by a name probably of Turkish origin, variously spelled as *gambus*”.

It is interesting to note that Sachs mentioned that the Persian lute could have arrived in the Malay Archipelago through “Islamic migration and conquest”. Sachs’s view clearly requires an examination of the probable dominant Persian influence on Southeast Asia before the arrival of Muslim Arab traders in the 15th century.³ This is an important quote by Sachs as it discusses some of the ideas surrounding the “transmission” with regards to the Malay Archipelago. It is possible that the *barbat*, could have been brought by *Sufi* missionaries from Persia who plied the trade route of the Muslim merchants to Southeast Asia.⁴ It supports the hypothesis that the *barbat* may have been introduced into the Malay Archipelago even before the arrival of Muslim Arab traders to Melaka in the 15th century. Historical evidence to proves that Persians and Arabs were in the Malay Archipelago as early as the 9th century.

Alatas supports the hypothesis of the presence of large Persian and Arab trading Muslim settlements in the Malay Archipelago (1985:163).⁵ Alatas states that a thriving port also existed on the west coast of the Malay Peninsular in the 9th century (named Kalah or Klang) inhabited by Muslims from Persia and India. Kalah is in the State of Selangor where the capital Kuala Lumpur is

Sumatra Reflected in its Music” (1952). Both reprints also appeared in *Indonesian Music & Dance* published by Royal Tropical Institute/Tropenmuseum University of Amsterdam/Ethnomusicology Centre “Jaap Kunst”, (1994:170: 237).

³ Sachs also claimed that the Persian lute (*barbat*) reappeared in the Islamic Near-East many centuries later. Its peg-box was bent backwards in a sickle shape and contained lateral pegs. The string holder was not frontal but at the lower end of the body and skin covered soundboard. This description is closely aligned to the *gambus Melayu* type instruments found in *alam Melayu* (Malay world). The migration could have carried this lute eastwards from Persia to Celebes [Sulawesi] in Indonesia [*gambusu*], and also to Zanzibar [*gambusi*] and Madagascar [*kabosa*]. He concludes that it was also introduced to Egypt around 1200A.D. Today this lute is extinct in the Near-East (1940: 251-252). *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, also briefly mentioned that contact with early spice trade brought many influences from Arabic-Persian sources. The 7 stringed *gambus* was mentioned as one of them (Mantle Hood: 1980:215:No 9).

⁴ Kunst described Sumatra and the surrounding islands as being strongly influenced by Islam and the Persian-Arabic culture. He mentioned *gambus* of the 7 stringed type lute as characteristic of coming from Persia and Arabian Peninsula (1994:175). This fact further supports one of my hypotheses that the *gambus Melayu* may probably be of Persian origin.

⁵ Summary of papers on “Hadhrami Diaspora” were discussions in the conference at Alwehdah (Singapore Arabs Association) on the 20th August 1995. Speakers were: Dr. Farid Alatas, Alwiyah Abdul Aziz, Harasha bte. Khalid Banafa and Heikel bin Khalid Banafa. Also see *Muslim World* 75 nos.3-4, (Alatas: 1985:163).

situated.⁶ It could therefore be possible to suggest that the Persians could have brought the *barbat* to the Malay Archipelago.

The question that comes to mind is did the *gambus* type instruments come from Persia or the Arabian Peninsula? The *gambus Melayu* that came to the Malay Archipelago could be either a direct descendant of the Persian *barbat* or from the Yemeni “*qanbus*”, which itself may have evolved from the “*barbat*” (Shiloah 1979:180).⁷ The *gambus Melayu* has striking resemblances to both *barbat* and *qanbus* type instruments. There is historical evidence to suggest that either of these routes were possible. The similarities between the *gambus* and the *barbat* are those that also link the *gambus* with the *qanbus* (During 1984:156: No.1).⁸ Even the strings of both types of *gambus* instruments are tuned in perfect 4ths, as it would be in the case of most Persian and Arabian lutes (Lambert 1997:90).⁹

Information gathered about the construction of *gambus Melayu* is similar in manner to the construction of *barbat*. Ella Zonis in her book titled *Classical Persian Music* concludes that *barbat* is constructed from one piece of wood. To quote Zonis: “*As early as the Sassanian period (224-651 A.D.) the Persians had a ud called barbat. The construction was different from that of the Arab lute since in the barbat, the body and the neck were constructed of one graduated piece of wood...*” (1973:179). The above quotation confirms the close similarities apparent in the construction of the *barbat* and *gambus Melayu*. One cannot doubt the probability of Persian influence in the

⁶ Dr. Alatas mentioned in an article, “Notes on Various Theories Regarding the Islamization of the Malay Archipelago” that the writings of Arab historians and geographers of the 9th century knew of the existence of Srivijaya Empire (Indonesia) that included large parts of the Malay Archipelago. Ya’quibi, for example writes of the trading connections between Kalah on the west coast of the Malay Peninsula and Aden (Yemen). Another writer, Ibn al-Faqih (902) mentioned about the cosmopolitanism of Kalah. Abu Zayd of Siraf (d.916) said Kalah lies half-way between China and Arabia and mentioned Kalah as a prosperous town inhabited by Muslims from India and Persia. Another 10th century source by Ismail b. Hasan mentioned in a condensed nautical treatise, as a work based in part on travels in the Malay Archipelago (*Muslim World* 75: nos: 3-4: 1985:163-4). However, historians Andaya and Andaya describe Muslim trading colony Kalah as being in the northern part of the Malay peninsular (1982:51). All these facts support the evidence of Muslims from Persia, Arabia and India, inhabiting some of the important ports in the Malay Archipelago.

⁷ Shiloah mentioned in his writing that the ‘*ud* was invented by a Persian philosopher Ibn Hidjdja (b.1366-d.1434) who called it *barbat* (1979:180).

⁸ The description given by Jean During in *The New Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments* closely identifies the *barbat* with *gambus Melayu*. However, During did not say where the *barbat* came from but he did say: “*The barbat had four silk strings, sometimes doubled, tuned in 4ths and plucked with a plectrum...At an early date it was exported to Arabia via Ai-Hira on the Ephrates. The North African kwitra and Arab ‘ud can be considered descendants of the barbat as can the Chinese pipa and Japanese biwa*” (1984:156: No.1).

⁹ Jean Lambert described in his book *La médecine de l’âme* that the *qanbus* from Yemen has three double course strings tuned progressively in 4ths except for the low single string which is tuned an octave lower to the high double course strings (1997:90). The tuning in 4ths is similar to most *gambus* of *alam Melayu*.

construction method of *gambus Melayu*. The descriptions by Sachs and Zonis about *gambus* implies the instrument may be of Persian origin.

Also, according to Farmer, the *barbat* was exported to the Arabian Peninsula from Persia. This may explain the close similarities between the ‘*ud* and the *qanbus* from Yemen.¹⁰ Farmer concludes that Persian lutes were taken to Arabia in late 7th century by Persian slaves who were to work in Mecca and other parts of the Arabian Peninsula.¹¹ In the 8th century Zalzal introduced a new type of ‘*ud* which superseded the *barbat*. It was this new invention (‘*ud*) that was brought to Europe with the Arab invasion of Spain and became known to the West as the lute (1967:108).¹²

The Arrival of Islam to the Malay World in the 13th Century

There is another hypothesis that claims that the Persians may have brought the *barbat* or even the ‘*ud* type instruments separately to the northern Sumatran states of Samudra, Pasai and Aceh during the 13th century as Islamic settlements were established by the early Persians.¹³ Picken concludes: “that the establishment of Islam in Sumatra in the 13th century has been correlated with the first transmission to the Indian Archipelago of *kopuz* like instruments” (1975: 269).¹⁴ It is believed that

¹⁰ Shiloah mentioned to me that most, if not all, references in Arabic sources seem to identify the *barbat* with the ‘*ud* either as one out of the five names of the ‘*ud*, or as a close variant of it (Date:26th March:2000). This makes the issue of these two types of lute instrument more problematic as the word *barbat* or ‘*ud* can be used to describe either instrument. Poche pointed out that the shape of the Yemeni *qanbus* is closely related to the early Islamic ‘*ud*. In comparison between the ‘*ud* and the Yemeni *qanbus*, the *qanbus* has reciprocal influences and continuous interaction with the Arabian classical ‘*ud*. However the *qanbus* is covered with lambskin painted in green as the colour of Islam and it has seven strings, three double strung and a single low string. Poche mentioned that at Sa’na in Yemen the *qanbus* is called the ‘*ud* of Sa’na or the ‘*ud* with four strings to distinguish it from the classical Arabian ‘*ud* in *The New Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments* (1984:168).

¹¹ By the 5th century, the *barbat* was used by Byzantine and Persian singing girls, although the Arabic ‘*ud* appeared in Mecca in the 6th century (Marcuse: 1975: 413).

¹² Farmer concludes that the old pear-shaped *barbat* type lute, without a definite neck continued to exist side by side with the ‘*ud* in the *Castigas de Santa Maria* (The Origin of Arabian Lute and Rebec: p.98). Sachs also describes a type of Moorish guitar of the 14th century ‘*la guitarra morisca*’ used by the Spaniards, was more and more influenced by the lute today which descended from the ‘*ud* (1940:252). Malay sources also claimed to quote Mustapha Nik Mohd.Salleh: “Spanish ‘*ud* is known as “*aloot*” or lutes in English are closely related to lute-type instruments” (1998:155). John M. Schecter in *The New Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments* describes the “*laud*” as a Spanish term for the Arabian ‘*ud* and that it was introduced into Spain by the Arabs in the 13th century (1984:508). Anthony Baines in *The Oxford Companion to Musical Instruments* also mentioned the “*laud*” with flat-back, oval or wavy sided body often with wavy sound holes and metal strings from Spain. It is tuned to six double courses and tuned progressively downwards in fourths (1992:19-20). This is what, as can be seen from the description closely related to the Arabian ‘*ud* (*gambus Hadhramaut*).

¹³ It is known that from Marco Polo that the port of Perlak in North Sumatra was converted to Islam in 1291-1292 A.D. (Aldo Ricci: 2002). Another scholar, Van Leur pointed out that by the end of the 13th century, rulers of some newly arisen coastal states in Northern Sumatra adopted Islam through Indonesian trade (Reid: 2000:17).

¹⁴ There are two problems here as Picken quoted this information from Sachs. Firstly, *kopuz* (*qopuz*, *qupuz*) is a long-necked lute dating from the 11th century used by some Turkish tribes of south central Asia. This instrument is similar to

the Aceh royal court in the 13th century also maintained musicians from Persia.¹⁵ Persian musicians were invited to stay in Aceh and even today strong Persian *Sufi* influence is still apparent in Achinese culture.¹⁶ During that time many literary works were translated from Persian and adapted into the Malay language.

It is difficult to state categorically when and how the *gambus* arrived in the *alam Melayu*. Questions such as: Was the *gambus* fretted or unfretted? Did it have wire, gut or other types of strings? are difficult to answer, as no documentary or iconographical evidence has been found. With little or no information regarding the arrival of *gambus* type instruments, the present research relied heavily on historical accounts and on theories regarding the Islamization of the Malay Archipelago during the 15th century. Early historical accounts of Islamization are vital clues for understanding the dissemination of Arabian and Persian lute-type instruments in the Malay Archipelago (Kunst 1994: 237).¹⁷ The golden age of Malay history and the concept of Melayu culture began with the Melaka Empire and the arrival of Islam in the 15th century.

Portuguese Domination of Melaka in the 16th Century

Although no historical sources have mentioned anything about the possibility of the Portuguese connection with the transmission of *gambus* into *alam Melayu*, I am inclined to follow another line of argument on the hypothesis of the Portuguese link. There is some evidence to show the

the *baglama* and *saz*. Sachs may have erroneously used the term *kopuz* to mean *qanbus*, *qabus* or *barbat*, which are structurally similar to the *gambus Melayu*. Secondly, the term “Indian Archipelago” described in the quotation is confusing. It may be helpful to refine its geographical terminology to mean “Malay Archipelago”. I suspect the term “Indian Archipelago” could be referring to the “spice islands”, which were commonly referred to as “Indian” by early European explorers to mean the “Malay Archipelago” during the 16th century exploration of the spice islands by the Europeans. The regional name “East Indies” is sometimes used as synonym for the “Malay Archipelago”. This term was confirmed by Dr. Karl Anthony Hack, a specialist on Southeast Asian History, Division of History, NTU/NIE. (Personal communication: 28th October 1999).

¹⁵ The Northern states of Sumatra have been influenced by Islam and the earliest gravestone of a Moslem prince was recorded in 1297 in Perlak and Samudra as mentioned by Tome Pires (Cortesao: 1990). The presence of some Muslim communities in Northern Sumatra was also reported by Marco Polo through his travels to this region in 1292 (Aldo Ricci:2002).

¹⁶ Alatas mentioned that many Sufi teachers and scholars introduced Greek philosophical thought besides Sufi theology to the Malay Archipelago (*Muslim World* 75 no3-4 (1985:173).

¹⁷ Kunst mentioned that the contribution of the Muslim i.e. Persian and Arabic realm in the field of music consists of several instruments commonly used in Islamic societies in the Malay Archipelago. He mentioned for example the *gambus*, *marwas* (hand-drum) and *rebana* (frame-drum) as well as the structure of a number of melodies found in the Malay world have come from Persia and the Arab world (1994: 237).

Portuguese arrival may have played a part in the transmission of *gambus*-type instruments into *alam Melayu*.¹⁸

Historical sources claim that since the early sixteenth century the Portuguese had brought large quantities of musical instruments to Melaka, especially plucked and bowed stringed instruments.¹⁹ The Portuguese who were in Melaka were not only the white Portuguese, but “*Portugis*”, also known as the “Black Portuguese”, who were usually freed slaves and mercenaries.²⁰ It has been documented that the Portuguese folk music and instruments were introduced into colonial Melaka households, performed by slaves of African, Indian, Moorish (*Morisco*) and other origins, resulting in a musical synthesis between Portuguese, Malay, African, Indian and Arabian musical elements and instruments.²¹ The freed slaves and “native soldiers” adopted Christianity, inter-married the local Malays, settled in *kampong* and also took up employment as ceremonial and Malay court musicians. On being converted to Christianity they were allowed to take up Portuguese citizenship and their descendants have promoted Portuguese culture in Melaka around *kampong Serani* (Sarkissian: 2000:26).²² Even to this day there are strong Portuguese cultural influences maintained in Melaka, thus preserving a distinct cultural identity in Melaka.

An important musical development was that various genres of music and dance styles emerged during the period of Malay-Portuguese contact such as *kronchong*, *joget*, *ronggang*, *dondang sayang* in the Malay courts throughout the Malay Archipelago (Kartomi:1997:312-319).²³ The importance of the “*Portugis*” community in the development of music with “Portuguese influences” concluded by Kornhauser (1978), Salwa (1997) and Kartomi (1997) presented another convincing hypothesis for the arrival of *gambus*-type instruments into *alam Melayu* (Malay world). Kornhauser

¹⁸ The Portuguese commander D’Albuquerque who invaded Melaka had 800 Portuguese and between 200-600 “others” as native sailors, soldiers and slaves. See Cortesao (1990).

¹⁹ Presumably the Portuguese sailors introduced a small guitar or lute-type instrument called *kroncong* that resembles the ukulele or the Portuguese *cavaquinho* (also known as *machete*). It is also assumed that the *kroncong* musical genre takes its name from *kroncong* lute. (*The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*: 2001:vol.12: 363).

²⁰ The “*Portugis*” music in the 16th century included not only Portuguese characteristics but also African, Indian and Southeast Asian stylistic traits. The “*Portugis*” consisted of *mesticos* (Portuguese –Indonesian Christians), converted locals and *mardijkers* (freed African, Indian or Malay slaves of the Portuguese converts. These “*Portugis*” also adopted Portuguese names and are proud of their “European” status and distinctive identity. At the same time the Portuguese culture was maintained through “descendants”, mixed marriages and free slaves who adopted Christianity and preserved distinct cultural identities. See Salwa El-Shawan Castelo-Branco (1997) and Kornhauser (1978).

²¹ See Salwa el-Shawan Castelo-Branco (1997).

²² According to Sarkissian the term *kampong Serani* was used to mean Christian settlement in Melaka, *Serani* to mean “Nazarene” is an old synonym for Christians (2000).

²³ *Kronchong*, *joget*, *ronggang* and *dondang sayang* are Malay music genres.

mentioned the Portuguese writer Filipe de Caverel had claimed that ten thousand guitars went with the Portuguese to Morocco in 1582.²⁴ I am inclined to believe the possibility of Moorish from North Africa, Persian from the Hormuz region of the Gulf States played a part in the transmission of lute-type instruments into *alam Melayu* as the Portuguese were trading and colonizing these regions as early as the 15th century.²⁵ Hence, the possibility of transmission of *gambus*-type instruments through the Portuguese cannot be discarded altogether.

The 17th and 18th Century Aceh – Johor – Riau Supremacy

It can be argued that *gambus*-type instruments could have also been brought from Melaka to Johor by the fleeing Melakans after their defeat by the Portuguese the 16th century. Johor-Riau-Lingga Empire became the direct inheritor of the old Melakan royal tradition. It has been claimed by scholars that *gambus* and *zapin* came to Johor from Melaka (Anis :1993). Arab music could have virtually been a court music and later spread into Johor and then to the other parts of Indonesia and Riau-Lingga Islands but these are only presumptions as there is little evidence to prove this point. Anis concludes that:

“In Malaysia, the coastal area of north-west Johore is the centre of the *zapin* tradition. This area was at one time under the political hegemony of the Malacca empire (c.1400 -1511). It is from this region that *zapin* is believed to have later spread to the outlying areas east and west of Malacca. The fall of Malacca was followed by the emergence of the Johore-Riau kingdom into the Malay world and a continuation of the Malacca lineages in other parts of the Straits of Malacca region. Singapore and the Riau Islands were historically tied to the greater Johore empire when *zapin* made its appearance in these areas”.

The conquest of the Melakan Empire by the Portuguese led to the establishment of a new Empire by the Melakan rulers in Johor Lama (old). The Johor Empire eventually became powerful and controlled the Riau-Lingga islands as well as the eastern coast of Sumatra. In the 17th century there was much contact between Aceh and the Johor Empire established from the capital at Johor Lama (old). Hence there is an argument that the *gambus* could have arrived into Johor through the northern Sumatran state of Aceh since the 13th century.

²⁴ This fact was recorded by the 16th century Portuguese traveler Mendes Pinto (Catz:1989). See *The Voyages and Adventures of Fernard Mendez Pinto*. Trans. H.Logan, London: Dawsons of Pall Mall. Also see *Suma Oriental of Tome Pires* by Armando Cortesao.

²⁵ The Portuguese under the command of Alfonso d’ Albuquerque dominated the key points in the Moslem trading network through which Asian spices trade reached Europe by seizure of Goa (India) in 1510, Melaka in 1511 and Hormuz, at the mouth of the Persian Gulf in 1515. (Andaya and Andaya: 1982).

As the Johor Empire maintained its supremacy over these areas, there were many contacts, conquests, inter-marriages, exchanges of musicians and, most importantly, political overlordship paid to the Johor Empire by the eastern Sumatran states and the Riau-Lingga islanders. Because of the close connections amongst these states in *alam Melayu* the *gambus* could have filtered across a triangulation of Johor -Riau -Aceh axis (see Map 2).



Map 2 Johor-Riau-Aceh Supremacy

The geographical closeness of Aceh-Johor-Riau axis made it almost inevitable for the Melayu people to engage in trade, commerce, inter-marriage and the sharing of musical styles. This eventually would have led to the absorption of each other's cultures and music. The triangulation of the Johor-Riau-Aceh axis may have played a crucial role in the spread of *gambus* and its musical styles through the sharing and adopting of each other's cultures. Something else that brought about the development of *gambus* was the patronage bestowed by the Malay rulers. The spread of Islam and the convergence of the common people in the sharing of culture also helped in the dissemination of the *gambus* throughout *alam Melayu*.

The 19th and 20th Century Yemeni Connection with the Malay World

In the 19th century there was a greater interest shown by the Arabs to trade and also some Arabs were attracted to settle down in the Malay Archipelago. The Arab immigrants in Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia originated predominantly from the valley of Hadhramaut. In the 19th century Hadhrami Arabs played a significant role in the spread of Islam as well as commercial trade in Southeast Asia. The Hadhrami not only arrived here as traders and merchants, but many were cultured and scholarly men imbued in Arabic literature, religious law and philosophy. They traded extensively in the archipelago where they were granted special commercial privileges because they were of the same “race” as the Prophet. By the 19th century, it had become the mission of Islam that was the primary goal of the Arabs in *alam Melayu*. The Arabs brought along not only trade but huge amount of rich cultural baggages with them.

Another significance is the establishment of closer contact with West Asia, which began in the 19th century with the steamship travels and the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. This shortened sea journeys and travel, especially from the Arab world to the Malay Archipelago. More exchanges and close developments of religious orthodoxy took place between the Arab world and the Malay world from the 19th century onwards. The economic success of the Hadhramis in the Malay Archipelago led to the arrival of more family members.²⁶

Hadhrami Arabs brought not only their music and culture but they also inter-married with the local women. Later Islamic clergymen and religious scholars from the Hadhrami community started to arrive in this region. Musical instruments such as the arched-back ‘*ud* arrived into this region once again in the 19th century. The arched-back lute became more predominantly used during the 19th century in Peninsular Malaysia. Interestingly, the Hadhrami communities in *alam Melayu* provide a fascinating case of transnational communities. They assimilated well into their host countries of Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore but retained their cultural identity at the same time. This is referred to as the Hadhami practice of “*asabiyya*” (Alatas: 1996).²⁷

Having considered the various “theories” on the arrival and establishment of the *gambus*, there is one more hypothesis on the arrival of the ‘*ud* in particular. The opening of Suez Canal in 1869 would have expedited and shortened the sea journey from the Middle-East to *alam Melayu*. The

²⁶ I am grateful to Professor Michael Gilson from the Department of Middle Eastern Studies, New York University for his helpful comments on the Hadhrami community from *alam Melayu* (personal communication: 10th-15th August 2000).

²⁷ Dr. Farid Alatas describes this as Hadhrami consciousness and identity. He pointed out that for centuries “Hadhramis married into Malay-Indonesian communities and retained their cultural identities without losing their sense of Hadhami identity because such identity is not national or ethnic but kinship-based” (Personal communication: 12th July 1999).

Arabian ‘*ud*, but this time coming from other parts of the Middle East, could have been re-introduced as a “second coming” of the *gambus* in *alam Melayu*. It can be argued that the popularity of the ‘*ud* (*gambus Hadhramaut*) superseded *gambus Melayu* in the late 19th or early 20th century in Peninsular Malaysia. In Peninsular Malaysia today, *gambus Melayu* has been almost completely replaced by *gambus Hadhramaut*.

The *Gambus* in *Zapin* Performance

It has been claimed by practitioners of Malay traditional music that a *zapin* ensembles (*kumpulan*) would be deemed “incomplete” without the *gambus*. There are two reasons for the importance of *gambus* in these ensembles. Firstly, the “sound” of *gambus* is associated with Islam and Melayuness. Secondly, the use of the *gambus* identifies them with specific genres of Malay traditional music.²⁸ In *alam Melayu* the *zapin* is a universal dance form. *Zapin*, or the kind of music and dance (*tarian*) associated with it, is also found in Java, Kalimantan and South Sulawesi.²⁹ Tom Ibur explained to me that there are different names and dance forms for *zapin* found in Indonesian provinces. For example, in Jambi (Sumatra) the *zapin* is referred to as *dana sarah*. In Java and Madura the dance and music is known as *zafin*. In Indonesian Kalimantan, Sulawesi and Maluku (Moluccas island) *zapin* is called *jepin* or *jepen* and in Tenggara (island) as *dani-dana*.³⁰ In Deli and Serdang (Sumatra), *zapin* groups were known as *kumpulan tari gambus* (groups of *gambus* dancers). Dr. Paranti confirms that *zapin* is also found in mainly Christian Ambon (Moluccas islands) and Flores, as well as in other parts of Indonesia, such as in Java (Jakarta), Sumbawa Island, Tidore and Ternate Islands, just north of Ambon, near the southern Philippines.³¹

Historian Richard Winstedt acknowledged that the word *zapin* is of Arabic origin and is frequently used in the state of Johor, as well as throughout *alam Melayu*.³² However it can have many musical

²⁸ Although the *gambus* is also used in other traditional Malay music genres such as *hamdolok*, *masri*, *inang*, *qasida* and *Orkes gambus*, these are not within the purview of this paper.

²⁹ Smithsonian Folkways, *Music of Indonesia* No.11, annotated by Philip Yampolsky. Also see *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (Christopher Basile: 2001: No.12: 357).

³⁰ Mr. Ibnur is the Director of the famous *Teater Tari Kajanglako* (Theatre and Dance Company) in Jambi, Sumatra (personal communication: March: 2001). For more information on *jepin* in Kalimantan, refer to “*Falsafah Tari Jepin Kalimantan Barat*” by H. Munawar Kalahan, Seminar *Zapin Nusantara*, Johor, 3rd-5th October 1998. Also see *Zapin Melayu di Nusantara* edited by Anis 2000.

³¹ Dr. Juliante Paranti, previously held the posts of Assistant Director of Archives at Arsip Nasional Republic of Indonesia, Chairman of the Jakarta Arts Council and Dean of the Faculty of Performing Arts at the Jakarta Institute of Arts (personal communication: 16th October 2000).

³² Unabridged Malay-English Dictionary, 6th edition, Kuala Lumpur, Merican & Sons, 1960/1965.

meanings in Malaysia. *Zapin* can refer to a particular dance form (*tarian*), an ensemble (*kumpulan*), tempo marking, speed, beat or rhythmic characteristics (*rentak*). Windstedt mentioned that *zapin* is a dance for males in pairs performed either by two dancers, or two rows of dancers. The *zapin* songs (*pantun*) and in particular *zapin* rhythms are important musical elements that shape *zapin* dance forms.

Although it may have begun as a dance performed by men, today it is rarely performed by a pair of male dancers. It has become a group dance, with one row of men, the other of women.³³ Female dancers wear the *baju kurung* (pull over blouse) or *sarong kebaya* with a *selendang* (stole). Sometimes, they use a decorative ornamental hairpin or flowers on their head. However, more recently the Islamic *tudung* (headscarf) has been substituted for head ornaments. The male dancer's attire is the *songkok* (Islamic head-dress) with *baju melayu* or *baju telok belangah* (two types of long shirt).³⁴ Today, the *zapin* of Johor is the result of the mixed culture of Arabs and Malays brought about through inter-marriage. It seems that the Malays adopted and modified the dance that has now become *zapin Melayu*. Traditional *zapin* music consists of singing accompanied by the *gambus* with *marwas* or *kompang* percussion instruments. In most instances that I have observed the *gambus* player is also the singer. Sometimes, Western musical instruments such as violin and accordion are used in *zapin*. Jennifer True describes the *zapin* as having "a small violin and an Elizabethan-looking instrument of the guitar class, as well as two small hand drums" (1941:106-107).

We can distinguish two kinds of *zapin* groups in Johor. The traditional *zapin* groups perform what are termed *lagu-lagu zapin* (singing of *zapin* with *gambus*). In contrast, the contemporary *zapin kumpulan* (ensembles) only performs instrumental music. The most important feature of both *kumpulan* (ensembles) is that the *gambus* is acknowledged as being the "king" instrument and it plays the lead role in both traditional and contemporary *zapin* ensembles.³⁵ When the *gambus Hadhramaut* plays the main melodic parts it gives the music a Middle-Eastern characteristic

³³ I have made observations in the Hadhrami communities in Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia where *zapin* dance was exclusively performed by only male dancers. However this is not the case with *zapin* performance within the Melayu community. The Hadhrami community living in *alam Melayu* will not be discussed in detail as they are not the main subject of enquiry of this paper.

³⁴ *Baju melayu* or *baju teluk belanga* is a pair of trousers (*seluar*, *serawa*, or *sarwa*) with a *sarong* worn over it. Sometimes a piece of cloth is tied round the forehead or head-dress known as *songkok* (made of black or blue velvet or cotton fabric) or *peci*. The Malay dress is named after the Johor Malay style of dress, which originated from Telok Belangah in Singapore. The name *Telok Belangah* today also refers to a political constituency in Singapore, which used to have a large Malay concentration.

³⁵ In Peninsular Malaysia *gambus Hadhramaut* is only used in playing both traditional and contemporary *zapin*, however, in Indonesia both types of *gambus* are used in playing traditional and contemporary *zapin*.

because of the use of Arabic modes and “arabesque” style of playing. On the other hand, *gambus Melayu* which has a “softer voice”, uses less ornamental decoration in its playing and it is less dependent on the use of Arabic modes in its *taksim*. *Gambus Melayu* performers derive the “*taksim*” mainly from the thematic ideas of Melayu tunes that have little or no relation to any Arabic modes.

Zapin music (with or without the dance) is performed at a variety of occasions, for entertainment, in connection with rituals, and in more obvious religious contexts.³⁶ For example, it is performed during weddings, at official ceremonies, a baby’s first haircut and variety shows. It also features in public concerts such as *zapin* festivals (*pesta zapin*), royal ceremonies, the completion of lessons in reading the *Koran*. It is a major part of Muslim community festivities, in dance halls, and community centres and also is often played at home. *Zapin* religious role is more historical. In the more obvious religious contexts *zapin* is performed at the time of *Hari Raya Puasa* (*Eid*), *Hari Raya Haji* (*Haj* pilgrimage), *Maal Hijrah* (before going on a pilgrimage to Mecca) and during *Nabi* (Prophet) *Mohammad’s* birthday.³⁷ Recitation from the *Koran* and the singing of religious hymns from the *kitab Berzanji* are used in *zapin* performances. It can be argued that the *zapin* was the only Malay dance tradition allowed to be performed in and near mosques (Anis: 1993: 10).³⁸ As Matusky and Tan say, “It seems that *zapin* is the only form of dance which is allowed to be performed in or around the mosque compound in Malaysia” (1997:145). Another interesting feature of *zapin* in the religious context is that it is performed during circumcision ceremonies, with Islamic chant and *kompang* playing.

The music of *zapin Arab* and *zapin Melayu* are quite different in the rendition of their *lagu-lagu* (songs). The music of *zapin Arab* is performed with more improvisation and the ornamentation by the *gambus* players is characteristic of Arabic style. In the music of *zapin Arab* the melodic phrases of the main tune are fragmented so much by improvisation that the tune may not be recognizable at times, whereas in *zapin Melayu* the *gambus* usually imitates quite closely the melodic lines of the

³⁶ *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* mention that in Ternate and Tidore Muslim rituals, songs and devotional dances also use *gambus* and *rebana* in *japin* [*zapin*] and Arabic-derived texts (Seebass: 2001: No.12: 357). Kunst also acknowledged Islamic instruments such as the *gambus* and *rebana* are found in Halmahera, Bacan, Ternate and Tidore (1946) as evidence of the functions of music in Islamic society. See reprint (1994:191). However, according to Dr. Farid Alatas *zapin Arab* is used only with religious song-texts (personal communication: 7th April 2001). Also see, Alatas, “*Zapin Arab: Asal dan Maknanya*”, (Singapore *Zapin* Festival: Seminar Paper: 3rd November:2001).

³⁷ *Maal Hijrah* is also known as *Zikral Hijrah*. It is a moment of spiritual reflection and introspection for all Muslim (personal communication: Sa’eda Buang: 1st November 2002).

³⁸ *Kitab Berzanji* is an Islamic hymn book.

main *lagu* (song-text) sung by the singer in an *asli* style.³⁹ Anis claims that both the music and the dance movements of the *zapin* belong to the world of Malay folk dance in Peninsular Malaysia (2001:67). However, most *zapin* tunes can be traced to folk songs from Hadhramaut. Even the dance motifs from the Hadhrami practices were adapted and only later developed and modified by the Malays.

Summary

The hypotheses on the arrival of *gambus* in *alam Melayu* have been mentioned by Sachs (1913;1940); Kunst (1934); Picken (1975) and Anis (1993), as being mainly through the spread of Islam. The Malay Muslim populations of the coastal areas of Sabah, Sarawak, Brunei and Kalimantan (Borneo) identify with Islam and regard the *gambus* as an important instrument of their culture. Information on the presence of early Muslim settlements in Borneo has been well documented in Chinese records. Islamic practices and *gambus* performances have become intertwined with some aspects of Malay music. Religious significance may account for the popularity and performance of *gambus* in Muslim areas of Sabah, Sarawak, Brunei, Kalimantan (Indonesian Borneo) and Sulawesi.⁴⁰ Hence, today the *gambus* is associated with Muslim populations in the whole of *alam Melayu*. There are many Malays who strongly believe that the *gambus Melayu* is of Malay origin, as opposed to *gambus Hadhramaut*.

Conclusions

No one knows for sure exactly how the *gambus* arrived in *alam Melayu*. My argument points to the fact that both types of *gambus* were already highly developed when introduced into the Malay Archipelago. There is no evidence of “similar” or “primitive” types of lute found that could point to the *gambus* being indigenous to *alam Melayu*.⁴¹ Evidence pointing towards the contribution of the Muslims from Persia and Arabia in the transmission of the *gambus* to the Malay Archipelago is substantial and conclusive. The *gambus* may have developed over the centuries in *alam Melayu*, however, the striking resemblance to *qanbus* or *barbat*, supports the theory that it was an

³⁹ The term “*asli*” means original and unadulterated (Coope:1991). It is used to refer to a kind of melismatic singing style used in many Malay music genres. Chopyak broadly defines *asli* as any old, traditional or semi-traditional music or style of performance; it also refers more specifically to a style of songs with distinctive rhythmic characteristics, as well as to an ornamented style of singing (1986).

⁴⁰ In Chinese records of the History of Sung Dynasty, the author, Chua-Ju-Kua refers to a Muslim diplomat from Borneo who travelled to China as early as A.D.977 (Hirth and Rockhill:1970).

⁴¹ The musicians and scholars I spoke to in Indonesia, (S.Berrain), Malaysia, (Professor. Anis) and Brunei, (Haji Nayan bin Apang) seem to agree that *gambus Melayu* originated from *alam Melayu* (Malay world).

“imported” instrument rather than being indigenous to *alam Melayu* albeit now modified and adapted.

I am convinced that the *gambus Hadhramaut* was a later arrival to *alam Melayu* as the ‘*ud*’ only arrived in Yemen in the 19th century.⁴² My research argues that *gambus-Melayu* type instruments probably arrived first. It could even be possible that these pear-shaped lutes were transmitted by others and not only the Arabs from Hadhramaut. The Portuguese connection presents yet another convincing hypothesis. The importance of the Portuguese influences and contributions on Malay music have been discussed extensively by Seebass (1976), Kornhauser (1978), Salwa (1997) and Kartomi (1997).

The word *zapin* has a complex set of meanings associated with its music and dance. However, the term also has a variety of interpretations, which are all derived from Arabic. The community that practices *zapin* in *alam Melayu* is generally the *Orang Melayu* people, professing Islam. In Malaysia, there are two kinds of *zapin*; *zapin Arab* and *zapin Melayu*. The main difference between these two types of *zapin* is in its dance, and to a lesser extent, in its music. The *zapin Arab* is a social dance and can be performed by any male dancers anywhere as the style and music is more a community dance. However, the *zapin Melayu* dance is syncretic and always in the process of change and also varies greatly from district to district throughout the whole of the Malay world.⁴³

Today the *zapin Melayu* dance has become part of the cultural heritage of the Melayu people, developing new dance forms from the existing extensive *zapin Melayu* styles of different localities, districts and regions. *Zapin* can be said to hold prestige with the Malay community due to its Arabic origin and links with Islamic culture. However, regardless of when and how *the gambus* and *zapin* were adopted by *alam Melayu*, it can be concluded that *gambus* and *zapin* now serve as musical icons in the *zapin* musical style identified with Malay musical tradition.

In short, both types of *gambus* were later modified and adapted to have regional characteristics and an identity that is today representative of Malay cultural heritage. It can be argued without doubt that the *gambus* and *zapin* are now the manifestation of the Malay/Muslim tradition through

⁴² This astonishing fact was confirmed to me in a letter by Dr. Jean Lambert on the 27th December 1999. Dr. Lambert is an authority on the music of Yemen. His work on the *qanbus* and ‘*ud*’ from Yemen is discussed in *La médecine de l’ame. Le chant de Sana dans la société Yemenite*. Nanterre, Societe d’ ethnologie, 1997.

⁴³ For example, in Malaysia one can find *zapin Sarawak*, *zapin Pahang*, *zapin Johor*, *zapin Borneo*, *zapin Perak* and in Sumatra (Indonesia) *zapin Deli*, *zapin Siak*, *zapin Palembang*, and so forth. Anis argues that *zapin* of today is a result of the artistic adaptation of *zapin Melayu* into Malay popular culture (contemporary *zapin*).

adaptation, modification and interaction with Arabic custom, culture and religion. Today, both types of *gambus* and the *zapin* dance act as powerful symbols and expression of Malay identity and pride tied to their culture and religion.

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