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**THE FOLK LUTE (*GAMBUS*),  
AND ITS SYMBOLIC EXPRESSION  
IN MALAY MUSLIM CULTURE**

LARRY FRANCIS HILARIAN

*Nanyang Technological University / National Institute of Education, Singapore*

**Subject:** The development of the *gambus* as Malay folk instruments and an exploration of the complex relationship between music and Islam in Malaysia.

**Purpose of study:** To evaluate the ambiguous role of music in Malay Muslim society and the significance of the *gambus* as a symbolic representation of Islamic identity of the Malay world.

**Methods:** Organology and ethno-historical perspective.

**Key words:** *gambus Melayu*, *gambus Hadhramaut*, *'ud*, pegbox, *hadith*, Melayuness, *suras*, *Qu'ran*, *Alam Melayu* and *taksim*.

The aim of this study is to: (1) identify the *gambus* as Malay folk instruments and (2) its association with Islamic cultures, traditions and philosophies within Malaysia. This paper will discuss the structural development of the *gambus*, found in Malaysia and also in other parts of *Alam Melayu* (the Malay world)<sup>1</sup>. What seems to be most confusing and unclear is that there are two distinct types of folk lute, but both are commonly referred to as the *gambus*<sup>2</sup>. I will then examine some controversies surrounding the instruments and make a clear distinction between the two types of *gambus* which can be classified as *gambus Hadhramaut* and the *gambus Melayu*<sup>3</sup>.

The Malay world is predominantly Muslim and the status of music is unclear and not always straightforward. What complicates this issue regarding music within the Islamic jurisprudence in Malaysia is the question of acceptance and rejection of music. Most contentious of all with regards to musical instruments is the problematic association of string instruments in medieval Islamic theological principles. In spite of its strong symbolic representation in the Malay world, the *gambus* at times conflicts with exegesis of Islam. The transmission of these instruments and their role and identity as “icons” of Islam are constantly challenged by Islamic purists.

As in the case of Malaysia, Islam is an official religion but it is not an Islamic country. It can be argued that these lute instruments today are represented as artifacts of historical “products” and are expressed as a “local cultural statement” of their folk identity. In deliberation, it could be concluded that today the *gambus* is considered as the “national instrument”, strongly identified with the Malay Muslim musical tradition of Malaysia.

## Introduction

Two kinds of plucked-lutes are found in the Malay Archipelago. Both types of lutes are known simply as, the *gambus* to the Melayu people<sup>4</sup>. The *gambus* that looks like the classical Arabian ‘*ud* can be referred to as *gambus Hadhramaut*, sometimes as *gambus Arab* or ‘*ud*. The other form of the instrument that appears similar to the Yemeni *qanbus* (sometimes called *qabus*, *turbi*, or *tarab* in Yemen) is referred to as the *gambus Melayu*<sup>5</sup>.

In Malaysia, the *gambus Melayu* is also currently known by five other names: *seludang*, *perahu*, *biawak*, *Hijaz* and *gambus Palembang*. These five alternative names for *gambus Melayu* have interesting metaphorical meanings. The *gambus* today is associated with the “national instruments” of Malaysia. Although it may not be of Malay origin the *gambus* can now be considered part of *Alam Melayu*. It is very important to realize that in the context of *Alam Melayu* this instrument has taken a variety of forms, differing in terms of shape, size, the number of strings, performance techniques, construction and repertory. In this respect, the *gambus Melayu* contrasts with the *gambus Hadhramaut*, which shows much less diversity. As for the *gambus Melayu*, there are many different shapes and sizes found throughout *Alam Melayu*, although the ones found in Peninsular Malaysia are quite uniform. Picken mentioned the name *gambus* from Indonesia, and *gabbus* [*gambusi*] (Zanzibar), applied to structurally related lutes resembling *rebab* from North-West Africa. These lutes are all variants of *kobuz* (an old Turkish word for lute) as described by Sachs. Picken concludes by pointing out the structural similarity between these forms and their joint similarities to the Chinese *hu-qin* of the Tang Period<sup>6</sup>.

## The *Gambus Hadhramaut*

The *gambus Hadhramaut* has an arched-back body with a fretless fingerboard and a relatively short neck, and probably originates from the southern Arabian Peninsula<sup>7</sup>. The *gambus Hadhramaut* has an almost sickle-shaped reverse or back-bent pegbox very similar to the classical Arabian ‘*ud*. In its physical structure, the *gambus Hadhramaut* is similar to the Arabian lute called *al-ud*<sup>8</sup>.

When compared to the European lute, the *gambus* has a more obtuse-angled pegbox. The *gambus Hadhramaut* has between eleven and twelve lateral pegs. Usually only 11 strings (5×2+1) are used and the twelfth peg is redundant, probably displayed for decorative purposes. The *gambus Hadhramaut*, when compared to the

classical Arabian *'ud* (5×2+1+1), is different with regard to the use of wood, tuning system, playing techniques, musical styles, the type of strings, its musical repertory, and the use of modes in its performances<sup>9</sup>.

### Measurements and Materials

The *gambus Hadhramaut* is made up of four parts: the arched-back, the belly, the neck and the pegbox. The general length of the instrument from tail end to the pegbox is about 72 cm. At its greatest depth it is about 22 cm and its width is 38 cm.<sup>10</sup> The pegbox (*kepala*) is approximately 23 cm in length and 4 cm in width from its lower base and has a diminutive shape at its uppermost part, measuring 5 cm in thickness. Fig. 1 below shows the superimposed diagram of *gambus Hadhramaut* and *gambus Melayu* from Johor, Malaysia.

The *Leban* (*Vitex*) or *Seraya* (*Shorea curtisii*) wood is commonly used for making the pegbox. The pegbox is tightly glued and nailed to the upper part of the neck of the instrument. Some makers use different kinds of wood for the tuning pegs, usually strong wood like *Jati* (“teak”) or *Cengal* (*Neobalanocarpus heimii*). *Jati* (“teak” – *Tectona grandis*) is used for the belly of *gambus Hadhramaut*. For the strips of wood that make the vaulted-back of the *gambus Hadhramaut*, wood such as *Seraya merah* (*Shorea*), *Merawan* (*Hopea* – related to *Seraya*, or a species of *Meranti Dipterocarpaceae* family) and *Durian Belanda* (*Durio malaccensis*) is used. The shape of the *gambus* body is sawn out and carved into a rounded mould. The body of the vaulted-back is made up of 15 to 21 thin strips of light-weight wood with an inner lining of between 0.6 cm and 0.8 cm. It is then covered with a separate flat wooden board, which forms the belly of the instrument, which is glued to the body.

The arched-back, pegbox and neck are polished with a coat of varnish made from powdered glass and glue. The belly, however, is left unpolished but smoothly sandpapered. The soundholes are ornamented; one large central soundhole is found near the neck of the *gambus* and two smaller soundholes appear near the stringholder (bridge) on each side of the eleven strings. Plywood is used to design the ornamentation decorations that cover the three soundholes. These decorations are attached from the inside. The two small side soundholes are about 5 cm in diameter

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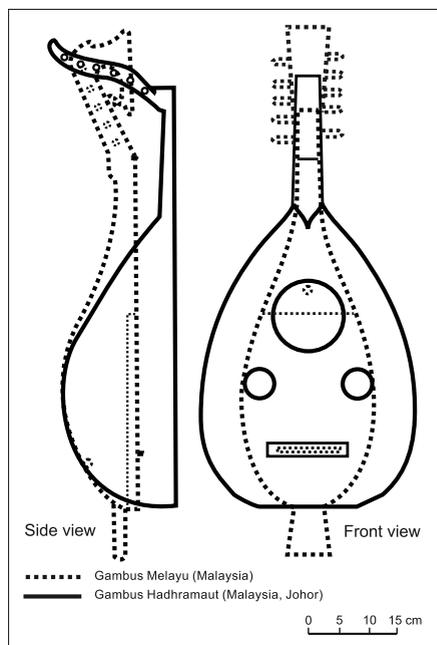


Fig. 1. The superimposed diagram of *gambus Hadhramaut* and *gambus Melayu* (Johor, Malaysia).

on the opposite sides of the belly towards the stringholder of the instrument. One large soundhole about 12 cm in diameter is placed more towards the top of the centre of the belly upwards to the fingerboard. The ornamental design is Islamic but older versions of the *gambus Hadhramaut* had Malayan characteristics of the crescent moon and star designs on its belly. A piece of hide is placed near the stringholder covering the portion of the belly where the plectrum comes into contact between the strings and the hide.

The neck (*leher*) forms the fingerboard of the *gambus* for which *Leban* wood is used. Ebony (from trees of the genus *Diospyros*), *Jati* (teak) or *Pokok Pinang* (betel palm, *Areca catechu*) is used for the fingerboard in more expensive *gambus*. The fingerboard is approximately 21 cm in length and 2 cm in thickness. The neck is slightly broader towards the end that joins the belly. The lower end of the neck measures about 5 cm in width, narrowing to about 4 cm towards the pegbox. The lower part of the neck is glued and tightly fixed to the shoulder (*bahu*) of the upper belly of the instrument. There is no evidence of *gambus Hadhramaut* of *Alam Melayu* ever having had frets. One can assume that the 'ud instruments that arrived here were unfretted<sup>11</sup>.

### Tuning

The tuning of the *gambus Hadhramaut* may vary from one locality to another, for instance in different provincial districts in Indonesia and Brunei, but the *gambus* tuning is quite uniform throughout Peninsular Malaysia and Singapore. The tuning pegs of the *gambus Hadhramaut* are set in the sides of a hollowed out pegbox. Eleven nylon strings are now used in stringing the *gambus Hadhramaut*. Five double courses starting from the high strings followed by one low 5th single string (5x2+1). In recent times classical guitar strings have been used on the *gambus* to replace the previously used fishing line<sup>12</sup>. The *gambus Hadhramaut* is tuned in 4ths. The lowest string of the *gambus Hadhramaut* is tuned to a *B* followed by *E*, then by the four double courses of *a*, *a*<sup>1</sup>, *g*<sup>1</sup> and *c*<sup>2</sup> using Helmholtz notation<sup>13</sup>. The higher strings usually play the melody, supported by a drone on the low strings. Fig. 2 shows the correct tuning of the *gambus Hadhramaut*, using western notation.

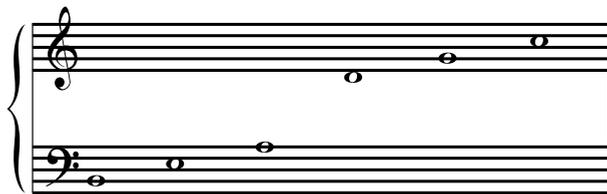


Fig. 2. Tuning of *gambus Hadhramaut*  
(Written pitch sounds an octave lower).

The technique required in playing the *gambus* demands strong articulation of melody and rhythm, which can only be possible with the use of a plectrum. Most of the Indonesian performers use buffalo horn or guitar plectra. The common form of

stringing the *gambus Hadhramaut* is fastening the string at one end to a peg within the right-angled pegbox, and attaching the other end of the string directly to a flat stringholder glued to the belly of the instrument.

The horizontal holes in the stringholder enable the strings to be tied securely in a loop at one end and around the laterally placed pegs at the other end. The decorations in *gambus Hadhramaut* have been gradually changing to Islamic style arabesques, and more floral designs on the soundholes have appeared. This kind of design is closely aligned with the Arabian style of ‘*ud*’ decoration, as there has been an increase in ‘*ud*’ instruments coming into Malaysia from the Middle East and Turkey. Until the beginning of the 19th century the *gambus Hadhramaut* was not as commonly used as the *gambus Melayu* in Malaysia.

### **The *Gambus Melayu***

The *gambus Melayu* is extensively used in *zapin* music, although in Peninsular Malaysia itself, it is now only commonly used in the *hamdolok* dance drama performances in the State of Johor<sup>14</sup>. When compared to the *gambus Hadhramaut* the *gambus Melayu* is slimmer, smaller and pear-shaped. This skin-bellied lute is found in Indonesia (Sumatra, the Riau islands, Kalimantan, and Sulawesi), Brunei, Singapore, Johor in Peninsular Malaysia and the coastal areas of Sabah and Sarawak in East Malaysia.

Since the beginning of the 20th century the pear-shaped *gambus Melayu* has been slowly replaced by the arched-back, wood-face belly of *gambus Hadhramaut*. This development was most obvious in Peninsular Malaysia, less so in Brunei and Indonesia. *Gambus* performers explained that between both types of *gambus*, the reason for the fewer performers using *gambus Melayu* is the smaller number of strings on the *gambus Melayu*. This affects the repertory because of the limited range of the instrument. A second factor is that *gambus Melayu* has a “softer voice” (*kurang bunyi*). Malay sources also claim that both types of *gambus* are used, although traditionally only *gambus Melayu* was used in *hamdolok*<sup>15</sup>.

All *gambus Melayu* types found in the Malay Archipelago are fretless. There are usually seven lateral pegs attached to a “C” shaped pegbox. The shape of the pegbox head and the shape and designs of the belly of *gambus Melayu* also differ from one another, largely depending on locality and region. The *gambus Melayu* pegbox from Indonesia differs from those in East Malaysia, Peninsular Malaysia and Brunei, where they usually have simple, undecorated pegbox designs. The Indonesian *gambus Melayu*’s pegbox often shows some symbolic representation of birds, flowers or animal heads. These are important mythological representations. Carving the pegbox decoratively into animals, birds or flower shapes seems to be a recent morphological development. The Indonesian *gambus Melayu* types seem to have a narrower and longer neck or fingerboard tapering from the belly to the pegbox. The fingerboard of the *gambus Melayu* from Peninsular Malaysia has a relatively short neck, tapering off to the pegbox upward at one end. The other end

broadens towards the belly and a protruding tailpiece. The hollowed fingerboard is covered with a separate piece of thin hard wood usually made of teak, *keladang* or ebony. Some *gambus Melayu* bellies have Islamic inscriptions written on the skin. Others have been completely painted all in one colour. Plate 1 shows the *gambus Melayu* with Islamic inscriptions in Arabic from the *Holy Qu'ran*.

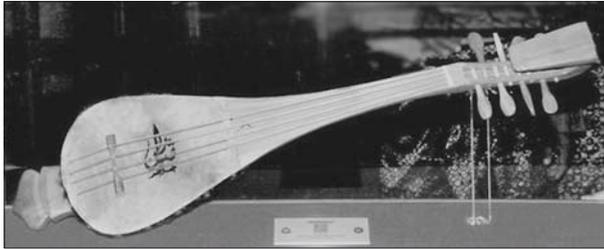


Plate 1. The *gambus Melayu* with Islamic inscriptions.

All *gambus Melayu* have a mounted tailpiece to which the strings are fastened at one end. The Malaysian *gambus Melayu* has a small hole of about 1 cm in diameter on the broader part of the fingerboard. There is also a “soundhole” at the lower vaulted back of the instrument. The Indonesian *gambus Melayu* also has three to five small soundholes, which are found on the lower face of the neck, with a minor soundhole at the back on the arch.

### Measurements and Materials

The overall length of the *gambus Melayu* of Johor (Malaysia) is about 88 cm. At its greatest depth it is about 13 cm. Its width is 23.5 cm. The face of the neck is flat and the lower portion of the belly is covered with skin to the extent of 32 cm from where the edge of the belly meets the tail-piece downwards (see fig. 1). Most *gambus Melayu* are made from the *Chempedak* (*Artocarpus integer*), *Cengal* (*Neobalanocarpus heimii*) and *Nangka* or jackfruit (*Artocarpus heterophyllus*) tree. This wood is found abundantly in Malaysia. It is preferred since it is a soft wood, which allows one to easily carve out the whole body of the instrument from a single block of wood by hollowing out the interior of the piece of wood. Another factor is that the wood does not shrink when dried. The Sumatran *gambus* is also made from jackfruit wood with a goat skin belly<sup>16</sup>. This confirms the type of wood used in making *gambus Melayu*<sup>17</sup>. The *gambus* of the “Melayu type” is found in East Malaysia (Sarawak and Sabah, formally British North Borneo). In these states the word *gambus* refers only to the instrument that has a similar physical structure to the “Melayu type” lute and not to the arched-back *gambus Hadhramaut*<sup>18</sup>. Sometimes the word *biawak* is used instead of *gambus Melayu*. The *gambus Melayu* is also extensively used in the Indonesian part of Borneo in Kalimantan and Sulawesi. In Sulawesi it is also known as *gambusu*. The Sulawesi *gambusu* is slightly different as it has a wooden belly quite like the Arabian ‘*ud*, although its structural shape is like the *gambus Melayu*.

A specimen of a Sulawesi *gambus* or *gambusu* was brought to my attention during my research trip to the Musée de l'Homme in France<sup>19</sup>. The *gambus* from Sulawesi at the Musée de l'Homme also has a reasonably large “soundhole” of about 7 cm in diameter, almost like that of a classical guitar. Another unusual feature is that the body tapers off to the neck with a longer and broader fingerboard when compared to the other *gambus Melayu* from Indonesia. The head of the pegbox is not as elaborate as the ones from Sumatra. The *gambus Melayu* specimen found in the Riau islands of Indonesia also differs from the ones found in other parts of Indonesia.

The *gambus* from some parts of the Riau islands, especially Pekanbaru, Siak and Bengkalis have been known to favor wire strings as opposed to the ones from all the other areas, which nowadays use nylon. Unlike the Malaysian *gambus Melayu*, the pegbox head from Indonesia is usually elaborately carved with symbolic representations attached to it. In the Horniman Museum Store I found three very interesting *gambus* instruments of a Javanese provenance<sup>20</sup>. The first specimen of *gambus (Melayu)* from Java has almost a round belly with a much longer neck, although the pegboxes were quite closely related to the plain and simple Malaysian model.

Another unusual observation is that the tailpiece of the *gambus* is much shorter and semi-circular, which looks very similar to the *qanbus* from Yemen<sup>21</sup>. The second specimen from Java has a diamond-shaped belly with a much larger tailpiece, also in the shape of a diamond. However, the pegbox head is similar to the Malaysian version<sup>22</sup>. The third specimen of the *gambus Melayu* from Java has an unusual “C” shaped pegbox. This *gambus Melayu* has a small belly but a much longer neck attached to its body. This particular model has a rather medieval European structure to its shape and also has a “rosette” design on the lower part of its neck. This design has a striking resemblance to medieval European designs found in *rebab* and *mandola* instruments although these influences are speculative<sup>23</sup>.

## Tuning

The tuning of the *gambus Melayu* is also in “perfect 4ths”<sup>24</sup>. In Malaysia and most of Indonesia the *gambus Melayu* is tuned to:  $A^3-D^4-G^4-C^5$  (3x2+1). In the Riau islands the *gambus Melayu*, which uses wire strings is tuned to:  $G^3-D^4-G^4-C^5$ <sup>25</sup>. However, the nylon-stringed *gambus Melayu* is tuned to the Malaysian accordature. The three double-course strings of the Brunei *gambus Melayu* are tuned to  $E^3-A^3-D^4$ <sup>26</sup>. The other common tuning of the Brunei *gambus* is similar to the Malaysian tuning of *D*, *G* and *C* double strung. The Eastern Sumatran *gambus Melayu* is tuned approximately to *G* as the lowest string, then a double course tuned to *A*, another string tuned to *B*, followed by three courses tuned to *D*, *A*, and *E*. The double course strings are tuned in unison. The tuning of the double courses, as argued by the practitioners of the tradition, is to strengthen the melodic line relative to the drone. Fig. 3 shows the tuning of the *gambus Melayu* using western notation.



Fig. 3. Tuning of the *gambus Melayu*.

The *gambus* found in Malay Muslim communities of the coastal area of Sabah sometimes use iguana skin instead of goat's skin. They have three pairs (3x2) of gut or brass strings played with plectra or a plectrum made from the claw of an armadillo<sup>27</sup>. There are two sizes of *gambus Melayu* found in Brunei. The standard size is 100 cm. Its belly is covered with skin for about 32 cm. The smaller size *gambus Melayu Kecil* (small) is 62 cm. It has a wooden belly with a soundhole towards the stringholder, with a diameter of 4 cm. It also has 3 courses of strings<sup>28</sup>. The standard *gambus Melayu* from Brunei has a belly made of deer, monitor lizard, snake or goat's skin.

### Symbolism, Contradictions and Ambiguities in Malay Muslim Music

Trade, commerce, conquest and intermarriages brought about the movements of people by definition involving the exchange of ideas, economic system, social structure, political empowerment and above all the sharing of cultural and artistic traditions. It can be argued that historically, Malaysia is one country that played a central role in the diffusion of Islam since the 15th century, as well as the *gambus*-type instruments throughout the Malay Archipelago.

Music and Islam still play a major role in Malay society, especially with its devotional Islamic songs and other forms of traditional music and dance. Although Malaysia's state religion is Islam, it is not an Islamic country. It can be argued that the dissemination of *gambus* is couched in terms of the spread of Islam. Hence it can be concluded that in Malaysia today, *gambus* performances are closely intertwined with Melayuness and Islam. The word Melayuness is a complex and contested term, and therefore a difficult concept to define, and is constantly being debated and challenged by social scientists and anthropologists. A precise meaning of "Melayu" or "Malay" have never been established (Barnard 2004). The term used here is largely based on this author's definition which may be different and not compatible with other disciplines mentioned.

What constitutes "Melayuness" is a changing concept, and the term "Melayu" has been in use from the early history of Melaka (c. 1400–1511 A.D.). However, the concept of Melayuness has different meanings in Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Thailand and Indonesia even though they are all part of the Malay world<sup>29</sup>. Before the arrival of the British, the term "Malay" was used to designate the polity of the sultan regarding his subjects and communities living around the palace. The term was not used as an ethnic category but rather referred to the place of origin from where they came from. The individual cultural experience of each "Malay area" has meant local adaptations of customs, dress, music, dance and dialect, but in

co-operation with and moulded in the concept of Melayuness – Islam is the most significant aspect of this term.

The playing of *gambus* and its musical genres is one musical practice that links the Melayu people of Malaysia to the rest of the Malay World in the sharing of a common musical culture and identity. It can be argued, that Melayuness and the *gambus* in particular, are strong symbolic representations of “being Melayu” and professing Islam<sup>30</sup>. Islam means “peaceful submission to the will of God” and Muslim means “one who has submitted to the will of God”, these are strongly crunched in Malay culture which are significant factors in achieving Melayuness.

The question of the lawfulness of music has been debated since the first century of Islam (9th century AD/CE) and it continues to this day (Shiloah 1979: 168). Arguments that music is sinful (*haram*) are based not on the *Qu’ran* but on the Traditions of the Prophet (*hadith*)<sup>31</sup>. Some of the rulings in Islamic law come from the *hadith* and are held to be binding if they are transmitted from reliable sources. *Hadith* also provides the most categories of rules that differ in opinion, separating the schools of Islamic jurisprudence from the *Qu’ran* (Cornell 1999: 92). The *Qu’ran* says nothing about music explicitly, but two *suras* are sometimes invoked as supporting music. In chapter 35, part 22, verse 2 it says, “He adds to His creation whatever He pleases; for Allah has power over all things” (*Qu’ran, Al-Fātir* [35]: 2). Some believe this refers to a beautiful voice, a theme discussed at length in the literature about sacred and secular music. Another *sura* which is said to imply approval of music is, chapter 39, part 23, verse 18–19, which says, “So give glad tidings to My servants, who listen to the Word and follow the best there of. It is they who Allah has guided and it is they who are men of understanding” (*Qu’ran, Al-Zumar* [39]: 17–19).

In general, the Malay Muslim population of Malaysia considers music as vital and necessary in both secular and religious aspects. Music is perceived by many Malays as having a positive spiritual value, especially if it is used in a devotional way, with moral meaning in its song-texts. Most Muslim Malays in *Alam Melayu* do not consider music to be sinful (*haram*); on the contrary, it is praiseworthy if used in the correct Islamic context<sup>32</sup>. However, in some Malay Muslim communities, music is regarded as profane, even though there is no clear explanation of *Qu’ranic* prohibition with regard to music in the Malay context. Some Muslim clerics regard music as an unacceptable art form for the Islamic way of life and in two states (Kelantan and Trengganu) music is today considered sinful (*haram*)<sup>33</sup>. The status of stringed instruments is of special interest. They have also been the subject of debate in Islamic society. Some Islamic purists and theologians banned the use of stringed instruments; the *barbat*, and the *‘ud* are listed among the forbidden instruments of Islam<sup>34</sup>. Paradoxically, the *gambus* is identified closely with the Islamic culture of the Malays. Heins described the *gambus* as widely used in Islamic religious music to accompany praise songs in Arabic or *Bahasa Melayu*. It can be argued that since the *gambus* is generally perceived in Indonesia as intrinsically Muslim, “an icon of Arabic culture”, it becomes acceptable to many Muslims who would ordinarily frown upon secular entertainment<sup>35</sup>.

In the Malaysian context, the *gambus* music (*taksim*) is used as interludes on radio and television just before prayer time, as is evident in the broadcasting of prayers through mass media<sup>36</sup>. How can the *gambus* be representative of Islam if it is incompatible with Islamic philosophy? It is a very interesting and important question. Contrary to Islamic principles, the *gambus* is regarded as a “holy” instrument, comparable to King David playing the *harp* or *rebec* as described in the *Bible*<sup>37</sup>. Muslims regard King David (*Nabi Daud*) and consider Jews and Christians because of their holy books (*Tora* and *Bible*) are referred to as the “People of the Book” sanctioned by Islam. There is a further symbolic meaning associated with the *gambus Hadhramaut*, its decorative sound-holes being representative of Islamic artistic expression<sup>38</sup>. Some traditional *gambus* players hold the view that the sound produced on the *gambus* is identified with “holiness” and Islam because it reflects the “sound” of the “holy” land of the Prophet. There is evidence to support the fact that chordophones (*gambus* / *ud* / *rebec* / *lyre*) have an association with “holiness” and celestial powers (Shiloah 1995). Some Muslim sources attribute the invention of the *ud* to Jubal’s father Lamech (Lamak), son of Cain, [al-Mufaddal ibn Salama (d. 830)] in his *Kitab al-malahi* (The Book of Musical Instruments) also by al-Djahiz (b. 776 d. 868–9) and Ibn Abd Rabbid (b. 860 d. 940).

These arguments about the sanctity of certain stringed instruments contradict what some Islamic jurists have said about them (Shiloah 1979: 244). One reason why the *gambus Hadhramaut* is referred to as a “holy” instrument is because it comes from the land of the Prophet, a place of central importance in Malay Muslim culture. However, this is not the case with the *gambus Melayu*, as this instrument is considered to be pre-Islamic and of Malay origin. To quote William Roff:

<...> the Malays had for centuries tended to look upon all Arabs, whatever their origin, as the direct inheritors of the wisdom of Islam, and on Sayyids in particular <...> as possessed of unexampled piety and religious merit<sup>39</sup>.

Strictly speaking, historically and geographically the Hadhramaut, a region of Yemen where most Arabs living in *Alam Melayu* originally came from, is not part of the land of the Prophet. However, geographical accuracy is not the issue with the Malays, for they consider the Hadhramaut region as part of this area. Although, I have argued the importance of the role of the *gambus* in Malay society, the complicated question of whether music is considered sinful (*haram*) in the Malay Muslim context is unclear. However, without any doubt, it can be argued that the *gambus* is certainly a symbol of Malay identity today and that to Malays it is symbolic of Islam. Today, Malaysia is quickly moving towards establishing a stronger Islamic ideology and it remains unclear where the status of music and the *gambus* lie on the continuum between acceptance and rejection. It can also be concluded that on a wider context the *gambus* is represented as symbols of pan-Malay expression which is now firmly tied to strong Islamic ideologies throughout the Malay world. Thus the position of music in Malaysia needs to be made clear by the Malay Muslims if music is to be permitted to fulfill Islamic values in their modern country.

## Conclusion

This research shows that there are two kinds of *gambus*, probably of different origins, found in the Malay World. These two lutes are fundamental to the cultural practices of the Malay Muslim community. The arched-back *gambus Hadhramaut* is closely related to the classical Arabian *'ud*. The much smaller pear-shaped *gambus Melayu* usually has a skin belly. The unique feature of the *gambus Melayu* is its decorative sickle-shaped carved pegbox that has symbolic representations carved into it (Hilarian 2003). In Peninsular Malaysia the *gambus Hadhramaut* is more frequently used in the performance of many Malay music genres. The *gambus Melayu* is slowly fading away in Peninsular Malaysia but its surprising popularity in the other parts of the Malay World is encouraging.

It can be argued that the symbolic representation of the *gambus* strongly identifies with Malay Muslim culture. To a large degree music provides an entertainment that is legitimized by its associations with the Arabic language and the land of the *Qu'ran*. In spite of its strong symbolic representation in the Malay World, the *gambus Melayu* is not generally used today in Peninsular Malaysia and hence its importance is waning. In Malaysia, music plays an important part in Malay society and traditional music continues to function in the normal everyday life of most people. Devotional Islamic songs are also becoming popular especially with the emergence of popular Islamic groups such as *Raihan*, *Hajjaz*, *Rabbani*, *Brothers*, *Hawa* and *Solehah*. However, the place of music within fundamental Malay Muslim society is still ambiguous as some religious purists have condemned all forms of entertainments as sinful (*haram*). In conclusion, I will argue that the *gambus* which identifies with Malay Muslim culture, also provides an entertainment that is legitimized because of its association with the Islamic “icon”, the Arabic language and the *Qu'ran*. Hence, the *gambus* has become a symbol of the new consciousness towards developing its own “Malaynized” Islamic identity independent of any Arabian influence and dominance on Malay cultural tradition.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The term *Alam Melayu* generally refers to a territorial network of genealogically related Malay kingdoms as shown in the Map. These countries currently include locations in Peninsular Malaysia, including Singapore, the east and southern coast of Sumatra (Jambi, Padang, Siak, Deli, Palembang) the coastal areas of Borneo (Sabah and Sarawak in East Malaysia), Brunei and westwards to Banjarmasin, Pontianak (south and west Kalimantan – Indonesian) and Riau Lingga Archipelago (Indonesia) and southern Thailand.

<sup>2</sup> The origin and the historical development of the *gambus* is not within the purview of this article although I have discussed this in the *Asian Musicology Journal*, 3, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> The word *gambus Hadhramaut* implies, in the Malay World, an arched-back lute coming from the valley of Hadhramaut, which is an old name of Yemen.

<sup>4</sup> The word *Melayu* means people of Malay genealogy and history.

<sup>5</sup> Dr. Christian Poche described to me that the *gambus Melayu* is probably from the Yemeni *qanbus*. The widely disseminated *qanbus* have varying terminology: *gabbus* [*gambusi*] in Zanzibar, *gabbus* in

Oman, *gabusi* or *gambusi* in the Comoros, *gabus* in Saudi Arabia and *kabosa* in Madagascar. Also see Henry George Farmer (1967: 209), Curt Sachs (1940: 252) and Cristian Poche (1994).

<sup>6</sup> Laurence Picken. *Folk Musical Instruments of Turkey*. London: Oxford University Press, 1975, pp. 269. My observation is that the *gambus Melayu* from Indonesia, Brunei and especially the ones from Peninsular Malaysia are structurally closer to the pipa than the *hu-qin (er-hu)* as inaccurately described by Laurence Picken. It is also interesting to note that the *gambus Melayu* from Sarawak has the pegbox head closely resembling the Chinese *san-xian* with its decorated pegbox head carved out into the shape of an animal, bird or mythical dragon. I have used *Hanyu pinyin* Chinese spelling to standardize names of Chinese instruments.

<sup>7</sup> The short-necked lute from the Arabian Peninsula also has five other names: '*ud*, *barbat*, *kiran*, *mizhar* and *artaba*, just like the *gambus Melayu*, as discussed earlier.

<sup>8</sup> H. George Farmer also describes in great detail the structure of Arabian and Persian lutes in "Oriental Musical Instruments" (Farmer 1939: 88–98).

<sup>9</sup> A fuller discussion of '*ud* from the Arab world or Turkey is not within the scope of this article.

<sup>10</sup> I have recorded measurements of at least 15 *gambus Hadhramaut* made by different makers in Malaysia. It seems that there are very slight differences amongst these instruments in size, depth and width.

<sup>11</sup> Frets may have been used in early Arabian '*ud*. Ella Zonis mentioned the work of al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, Safi al-Din and discussed in great detail the different systems of fretting the lute and the intervals that could be obtained on the instrument (Zonis 1973: 178). H. George Farmer also tells us that early Arabic treatises have described with almost every technical musical detail the number of strings, as well as the number of locations of frets the lutes had (Farmer 1939). Sibyl Marcuse mentioned that in the 9th century Arab scholar Ibn Salama mentioned frets in connection with *barbat* and a 10th century Arabic encyclopaedia identifies the *barbat* (pl. *barabit*) as Persian (Marcuse 1975: 413–415). Al-Farabi not only mentions the '*ud*'s frets, but states that they fulfilled the function of bridges i.e., nuts. Professor Amnon Shiloah in a correspondence with me categorically stated that all treatises of the first centuries of Islam mentioned that the '*ud* had 4 strings and frets (Date: 26th March 2000).

<sup>12</sup> Margaret J. Kartomi states that the *gambus* in Sumatra used pineapple fibre but now nylon strings are used (Kartomi 1984). This may have been possible in the case of Malaysia as well during the early introduction of the *gambus*.

<sup>13</sup> According to the writings of al-Farabi, Arabs generally tune their lutes in fourths because it helps in playing with consort or ensemble groups. The tuning means that a *gambus* could easily be accommodated within these ensemble groups. This kind of tuning is common in Central Asian lute music and the idea of tuning in 4ths may have originated from there as mentioned by Werner Bachmann in *The Origins of Bowing* (1969: 27).

<sup>14</sup> *Zapin* is an Arabian influenced musical genre. *Hamdolok* is also a dance drama performance of Arabic influence, performed only in the State of Johor in the southern part of the Malay Peninsula.

<sup>15</sup> Asmad, *Seni Lagu dan Permanian Tradisi*, and *Siri Bunga Rampai Kebudayaan*, Malaysia, Published by Association Education Distributors.

<sup>16</sup> *The New Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments* (Kartomi 1984: 9–10) and a Malay source *Alat Muzik Tradisional Dalam Masyarakat Melayu Di Malaysia* (1999).

<sup>17</sup> The method of making lute instruments is also similar to the Meccan and Hadrami *qabus* or *qanbus*, which was described by Farmer (The Origin of the Arabian Lute and Rebec. *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 1931, pp. 91–107).

<sup>18</sup> Refer to *Penganakan Kepada alat alat Muzik Tradisi Sabah*. Department of Sabah Museum and State Archives, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, East Malaysia (Regis 1992).

<sup>19</sup> I am grateful to Lucie Rault from the Museum National d' Histoire Naturelle, *Laboratoire d' Ethnologie chargee du departement Ethnomusicologie* in Paris for showing some of the instruments from Southeast Asia in the Museum's store house during my visit there on the 2nd July 1999.

<sup>20</sup> From the Horniman Store at Greenwich, London. My thanks to the Keeper of Instruments, Margaret Birley for helping me in locating and documenting *gambus Melayu* during some of my visits to the Horniman. The three specimens found in the Horniman Museum Store had the word *gambus* labelled on them. As they certainly looked similar to the *gambus Melayu* type, I have referred to them in this research as distinctly *gambus Melayu* variants.

<sup>21</sup> See Jean Lambert (1997: 85–90).

<sup>22</sup> This diamond-shaped *gambus* from Java opens up insights into possible Indian influences. Jaap Kunst has described the presence of many lute instruments found in Borobudur as being of Indian influence (Kunst 1968: 12–17).

<sup>23</sup> See Karl Geiringer (1978: plate XIV) and Sibyl Marcuse (1975: 436).

<sup>24</sup> H. George Farmer described that the Arabs generally were using a four-stringed lute in the early years of the 8th century (Farmer 1970: 241). Whether the tuning system was borrowed from the Persians cannot be said with certainty. What is interesting is that the tuning of fourths was introduced as tuned to: A-D-G-C. This tuning is today used in both types of *gambus* that are found in most parts of *Alam Melayu*.

<sup>25</sup> French ethnomusicologist Jean Lambert mentioned that the tuning of the wired-string *gambus Melayu* is similar to the tuning of the *qanbus* in Yemen. (I am grateful to Dr. J. Lambert for his critical and helpful comments on this research. Date: 27th December 1999).

<sup>26</sup> This was confirmed in a paper given by Haji Manaf Haji Kamis *Gambus Brunei Asli* Forum Paper, 2nd Asean Composers Forum on Traditional Music, 11–24 April 1993. Published by the National Arts Council of Singapore on behalf of the ASEAN COCLI.

<sup>27</sup> Edward Frame also mentions the *gambus* in Sabah is only played by the Muslim communities (1980: 247–273). However, the use of the terms “iguana” and “armadillo” are incorrectly stated in the Department of Sabah Museum and State Archives (Regis: 1992) document. There are no iguanas in Southeast Asia but only in South America. The monitor lizard (*varanus salvator*) of Southeast Asia, is frequently referred to as iguana, by the people of the Malay World. Similarly, there are no armadillos in Southeast Asia but again a local mammal known as scaly anteater or Malayan pangolin (*manis javanica*), is mistakenly referred to as armadillo.

<sup>28</sup> I have not seen the small *gambus Melayu* in other parts of Peninsular Malaysia or Indonesia. I have named it as *gambus Melayu Kecil* (small *gambus Melayu*).

<sup>29</sup> The concept of Malayuness is defined only within Malaysia in this paper.

<sup>30</sup> Another instrument that is associated with Malayuness and Islam is the *kompang* (frame-drum). The frame-drums are widely used in many Islamic ceremonies.

<sup>31</sup> There are two meanings to the term *hadith*. The first usage refers to the Arabic word which literally means to “communicate”, “a story”, “conversation”, or “historical events”. This word has been used 23 times in the *Qu’ran*. The second meaning is used more widely and it refers to the “sayings” of the Prophet. This latter meaning of the *hadith* is a compilation of over a thousand narratives of the Prophet that has been compiled and recorded by the Companions of the Prophet, between 100 and 150 years after his death. In some ways an analogy can be drawn to the Gospels of the New Testament, which is also a collection of “sayings” of Jesus according to the teachings of the apostles.

<sup>32</sup> Encik Yusnof Ef, a well-known composer, producer, music writer and Malay music critic with *Berita Harian* (Daily National Malay language Newspaper), explained that music is not proscribed in Malay-Muslim society. In a seminar he gave *Ceramah: Apa yang Dikatakan Muzik Melayu* 17th July 1999, at the Malay Village-Singgahsana Hall. Yusnof Ef acknowledged that the *gambus* is closely associated with Malay / Muslim society. He reiterated that if music is associated with erotic dancing and used in the company of wanton women or listened to with lyrics not compatible to Islamic teaching and used with the influence of drugs and alcohol then it is haram (sinful) in Islamic eyes (personal communication: 12th March 1997)

<sup>33</sup> In this article I am not going to go into the discussion on Islamic censorship on music in Malaysia but I will only briefly touch on the situation regarding the recent rise in fundamental Islamic states in Peninsular Malaysia.

<sup>34</sup> See Amnon Shiloah (1979).

<sup>35</sup> *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (1984, Vol. 7, pp. 142). The latest edition of the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (2001, Vol. 12, pp. 281).

<sup>36</sup> The *taksim* is a tonal-spatial component of fixed scalar (melodic) structure played in free rhythm, a type of performance rooted in Arabic music. The *taksim* is highly motivic in nature, with characteristic short melodic passages being combined to form extended musical structures. Although microtones are used at times, the intervals do not have a completely fixed size when they are used according to the

modal structure of the *taksim*. The term *taksim* means “division” or “sections”. The improvised melodic phrases are divided into sections, and depending largely on the musician’s ability, state of mind and circumstances, they give him the freedom to express his creative skills during the performance.

<sup>37</sup> The Bahasa Melayu / Bahasa Indonesian translation of the *Bible* (*Alkitab*) describes psaltery and rebec as *gambus*. Refer to 1 Samuel 10, Daniel 3 in [http://www.bit.net.id/SABDA-Web/ISa/3\\_ISa10.htm](http://www.bit.net.id/SABDA-Web/ISa/3_ISa10.htm). This would imply that the word *gambus* may be a generic term to mean *lyre*, *psaltery*, both bowed and plucked lutes as described in the Malay and Bahasa Indonesian versions of the *Holy Bible* (*Lembaga Alkitab* 2001). The Jewish *Midash / Tora* associates Jubal with the invention of all musical instruments [Yuval] (*The Jerusalem [Tora] Bible*. Koren Publication, Israel, 1998, Beresht: 4, pp. 21). The Christian *Bible* mentions Jubal, as the father of such instruments as the lyre (*Holy Bible*, (New International Version). USA, 1983, Genesis: 4, pp. 21). The Arab Christian philosopher Hunayin ibn Ishaq (d. 73) mentioned the cosmological association of the 4 strings on the ‘*ud* to celestial imagery. Greek philosophers alleged the ‘*ud* and its imagery as being in perfect harmony ruling the universe (Shiloah 1995).

<sup>38</sup> Green and Black are colours associated with Islam in Malaysia.

<sup>39</sup> See William R. Roff (1964: 80).

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# LIAUDIŠKA LIUTNIA (*GAMBUS*) IR SIMBOLINĖ JOS RAIŠKA MUSULMONIŠKOJE MALAJŲ KULTŪROJE

LARRY FRANCIS HILARIAN

## Santrauka

Straipsnyje aptariamos dviejų tipų liaudiškos liutnios, aptinkamos malajų pasaulyje ir paprastai vadinamos *gambus*. Pirmoji, odiniu korpusu, vadinama *gambus Melayu*, o antroji, mediniu korpusu, labai artima arabų *'ud*, vadinama *gambus Hadhramaut*. Straipsnyje taip pat nemaža dėmesio skiriama sudėtingiems muzikos ir jos instrumentų naudojimo šiuolaikinėje musulmoniškoje malajų visuomenėje klausimams. Darbo pabaigoje aptariama *gambus*, kaip malajų musulmoniškosios tapatybės simbolio, svarba.

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