

Bodies of Sound, Agents of Muslim Malayness: Malaysian Identity Politics and the Symbolic  
Ecology of the Gambus Lute

Joseph M. Kinzer

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Reading Committee:

Christina Sunardi, Chair

Patricia Campbell

Laurie Sears

Philip Schuyler

Meilu Ho

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Joseph M. Kinzer

University of Washington

**Abstract**

Bodies of Sound, Agents of Muslim Malayness: Malaysian Identity Politics and the Symbolic Ecology of the Gambus Lute

Joseph M. Kinzer

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Dr. Christina Sunardi

Music

In this dissertation, I show how Malay-identified performing arts are used to fold in Malay Muslim identity into the urban milieu, not as an alternative to Kuala Lumpur's contemporary cultural trajectory, but as an integrated part of it. I found this identity negotiation occurring through secular performance traditions of a particular instrument known as the *gambus* (lute), an Arabic instrument with strong ties to Malay history and trade. In Malaysia, the *gambus* is a potent symbol through which Malay Muslim identity is negotiated based on various local and transnational conceptions of Islamic modernity. I explore the material and virtual pathways that converge a number of historical, geographic, and socio-political sites—including the National Museum and the National Academy for the Arts, Culture, and Heritage—in my experiences studying the *gambus* and its associated genres of *muzik Melayu* (Malay music). I

argue that the *gambus* complicates essentialist models of Malay identity through multiple agentic forces, including people (musicians, teachers, etc.), the *gambus* itself (its materials and iconicity), various governmental and non-governmental institutions, and wider oral, aural, and material transmission processes.

In developing my argument, I explore three interrelated issues: Malay and wider Malaysian identity politics, including the historical and contemporary concept of Islamization in Malay society; the concept of agency and how expressive phenomena emerge as identity markers through competing forces of materio-symbolic agency; and musical transmission, specifically as it relates to the *gambus* as a Malay identity symbol and its role in complicating articulations of Malay identity. I consider transmission from its broadest perspective, one that includes pedagogy and performance in various institutions, but also how instrumental materials, style characteristics, and the use of virtual and physical spaces transmit identity formations using the *gambus*. I show that the materials underlying identity performances are as powerful as their human counterparts, all operating in their own kind of symbolic ecology, which I define as the way symbols emerge and how they are organized within a physical and conceptual environment. I investigate the unique role of sound bodies—both nonhuman and human—in creating, restructuring, and reinforcing collective ideas of Malay identity in contemporary Malaysian social life.

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**Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to my partner in this life, Catherine Kinzer, who has supported me through thick and thin during this often exciting, sometimes grueling, and occasionally emotionally fraught process. She is the mother of my daughter, Rose, and the love of my life.

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## Chapter 1: Agency and Identity Performance in a Pluralistic Malaysian Field

In the global urban center that is Malaysia's capital, Kuala Lumpur, sectarian identity conflicts are increasingly challenging as multiple modes of modernity and value systems collide in the pluralistic social milieu. Historically, the Chinese Malaysian minority has dominated Malaysian economic development, while the Malays have led population growth and governmental politics. In Malaysian popular entertainment history, Malays are portrayed as rural dwellers, inept at city life (Kahn 2003:159). Thus, there is an anxiety about the place of Malays in urban Malaysia. Since Islamic identity is important to Malay identity, the urban, secular, and consumerist environment of Kuala Lumpur is often at odds with conservative ideals of Malay identity. As a result, explicitly religious organizations often fail to fully integrate with the urban Malaysian cultural landscape. I suggest that Malay-identified performing arts are used to fold in Malay Muslim identity into the urban milieu, not as an alternative to Kuala Lumpur's contemporary cultural trajectory, but as an integrated part of it—not explicitly religious but couched in terms of Malay Muslim identity. Based on my fieldwork observations, this dissertation argues that *gambus* transmission processes complicate articulations of Malay identity through multiple agentic forces, including people (musicians, teachers, etc.), the *gambus* itself (its materials and iconicity), various governmental and non-governmental institutions, and the oral, aural, and material transmission processes found in urban Malay social events, such as weddings and religious celebrations.

In developing my argument I explore three interrelated issues: Malay and wider Malaysian identity politics, including the historical and contemporary concept of Islamization in Malay society; the concept of agency and how expressive phenomena emerge as identity markers through competing forces of materio-symbolic agency; and musical transmission, specifically as

it relates to the *gambus* as a Malay identity symbol and its role in complicating articulations of Malay identity. I consider transmission from its broadest perspective, one that includes pedagogy and performance in various institutions, but also how instrumental materials, style characteristics, and the use of virtual and physical spaces transmit identity formations using the *gambus* as a materio-symbolic mechanism. In many ways, I show, the materials underlying identity performances are as powerful as their human counterparts, all operating in their own kind of symbolic ecology, which I define as the way symbols emerge and how they are organized within a physical and conceptual environment. I investigate the unique role of sound bodies—both nonhuman and human—in creating, restructuring, and reinforcing collective ideas of Malay identity in contemporary Malaysian social life.

When I first visited Malaysia in 2011, I was—incidentally—studying the *oud* with my graduate colleague and teacher, Aboud Agha. My musical expectations of Southeast Asia included the famous gong and drum ensembles, but not the *oud*, which I associated with the Middle East and North Africa. I was surprised to encounter the *oud* in Malaysia on numerous occasions as I attended various cultural festivals and museums around the country. After meeting several musicians, I learned that this instrument is referred to as the *gambus*, regardless of the historical differences between similar lutes found throughout the Arabian Peninsula, from which the Malaysian *gambus* derives. Below I describe in more detail the historical difference between the *gambus* and *oud*, and how the two are conflated in Malaysia. After a while, I began to understand that this instrument was a potent symbol of local Malay identity, which is the majority ethno-linguistic group in the country. Intrigued by how a simple lute could become so heavily bound up in identity politics, I chose to pursue a more serious study of this instrument in the Malaysian context.

While living in Malaysia for thirteen months in 2015-2016, I took the light rail transit system (LRT) nearly every day to and from my apartment in Pantai Dalam, a residential area in southwest Kuala Lumpur. On one particular trip, as I traversed the city in search of the *gambus* in its various manifestations, the *gambus* apparently found me, appearing on the side of an approaching LRT train. As I boarded, I noticed a Samsung ad for the company's new smartphone displayed on the side. Featured in the ad was an image of the phone being used to take a photo. In the photo was a man playing the *gambus* and wearing a *songkok* (Malay traditional cap), clearly marking him with Malay identity. The musician was circled, displaying the photo markup capabilities of the smartphone, while also highlighting the *gambus* (see Figure 1). This experience only solidified the indexing that I—and a Malaysian public—repeatedly recognized between Malay culture and this instrument in Malaysia. In the background of the photo sat an array of percussion instruments that are ubiquitous in music around the world as well as staples of most Malay idioms. Through repeated exposure to this kind of serendipitous identity work associated with the *gambus*, I became aware its transmission folded Malay identity into the global urban center through a politically inconspicuous instrument, its related Malay music complex, and the symbolic ecology within which these phenomena formed nexes of identity transmission.



Figure 1: Samsung advertisement displayed on the side of an LRT train in Kuala Lumpur featuring a Malay man playing the *gambus*. The blue circle is part of the advertisement. 20 April 2015. Photo by Joseph Kinzer.

A similar encounter with the *gambus* occurred early on in my fieldwork, when I regularly listened to public radio broadcasts, mostly to practice my Malay language (*Bahasa Melayu*) skills. As I listened periodically, what particularly struck me was the *adhan* (call to prayer), which airs five times per day, as per Islamic custom. Before each *adhan*, the network played a short *gambus* clip, approximately 3-4 seconds in length, sometimes drawn from a Middle Eastern *oud* repertoire, and sometimes from a local Malay recording. I view this phenomenon as a deliberate indexing of the *gambus*' sound and timbre with Islam in Malaysia. During my fieldwork I encountered numerous examples of the *gambus* mediating expressions of Malay Muslim identity. Since most of the music I studied involving the *gambus* was secular, this direct line between the *gambus* and religious cultural expression was puzzling to me. I soon learned that the *gambus* was an influential symbol with the power to transmit complex Malay identity formations and their place within the urban milieu.

Throughout my fieldwork, my teachers discussed a reverence toward the treatment of transmission materials, including sonic and physical materials. I suggest that the explanation for such a reverence toward these materials lies in their perpetual weaving into a symbolic ecology. Aspects of this symbolic ecology and the agentic forces within are sometimes mysterious to the human observer and are not always readily understood. My teachers and I discussed the powerful allure of aromatic woods in lute construction, the importance of intricately carved wooden sound hole rosettes, and the lute's potential as a tool for healing a variety of mental and physical illnesses. Concerning the proper stringing of the instrument and general upkeep, my teacher, Raja Zul, likened the practice to putting on a uniform, with each minute component equally important as the next. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz famously argues for paying special attention to seemingly mundane details in fieldwork (1973). In my research, I found it useful to trace each performative transmission byte, or unit of meaning making, such as the type of wood used to construct the instrument, to a wider schematic framework forming the symbolic ecology of *gambus* transmission.

### **Gambus versus Oud**

When I first encountered the *gambus* in Malaysia, I was confused by the names. I heard it described as both the *gambus* and the *oud* ("wood" in Arabic). The *gambus* is a shortneck lute brought to the Malay Peninsula through the historical trade between Indian Ocean societies, especially India and the Hadhramaut on the Arabian Peninsula. It is unclear whether the *gambus* arrived in the Malay Peninsula via trade routes through India or directly from Hadhrami migrants to the Straits of Malacca, which possibly occurred as early as the 8th century, with a great influx of sayyid Hadhramis in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, and later a more general immigration that

reached its apex in the early 20th century (Riddell 2001:117, (Karim 2009:121).<sup>1</sup> Hadhrami migrants were some of the largest Arab populations to reach the Malay world, immigrating to the Peninsula, Sumatra, Singapore, Borneo, and beyond (Ho 2006:154). This immigration is a likely explanation for why the Hadhrami-style *gambus* lute (before the saturation of the *oud*-style) can be found throughout these areas. The name *gambus* comes from a lute found throughout the Arabian Peninsula.

In Mecca, the instrument was referred to as the *qabūs*, in the Hadhramaut it was *qanbūs*, and in Oman it was the *qabbūs* (Farmer 1929:491). The 19<sup>th</sup> century Dutch explorer, Snouck Hurgronje, argued that these terms derive from Turkish origins, for example, the *kopuz* lute (492). However, musical instrument curator Laurence Libin asserts that the linguistic connection between Turkish lutes and the Hadhrami *qanbūs* is an erroneous one (2014). Most Malaysian *gambus* musicians I met attributed the *gambus*' arrival in the Malay world to the Arabian connection, unaware of its possible migration through India. In Malaysia, anything Arab tends to bear significant symbolic capital as a signifier of a transnational Islamic identity, from fashion to architecture to the performing arts. While the *gambus* derives from historical Arab connections with Southeast Asia, the more iconic Middle Eastern *oud* was increasingly popular amongst urban Malay musicians, yet still commonly referred to as *gambus*, despite the historical differences between these lutes.

Historically, the Hadhrami *gambus* is smaller than the Arab *oud*, in addition to some important differences, such as a goat or lizard skin covered soundboard (see Figure 2). The Hadhrami style lutes are still manufactured in Malaysia, but I found that KL musicians increasingly chose to play imported Turkish or Egyptian *ouds*. Due to this demand, lute makers

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<sup>1</sup> I am not suggesting that Islam began to influence the region this early, but some historians believe that a general Arab culture was present in the region earlier than the advent of Islam.

in Peninsular Malaysia began designing lutes based on the Middle Eastern models as early as the 1950s, but increasingly so in the last ten years. In Malaysia, the Hadhrami style *gambus* is usually called “*gambus*,” but the Middle Eastern *oud*-type lutes are frequently referred to interchangeably as both “*gambus*” and “*oud*.”<sup>2</sup> Conflating the two and switching back and forth between names blurs identity models, thus transmitting Malay identity as bound up with a transnational Islamicate identity framework. Furthermore, by calling the *oud*-type lutes “*gambus*,” musicians in Malaysia localize ideas of the instrument, historically tying a strong marker of Islamic identity to Malaysian and Malay history.

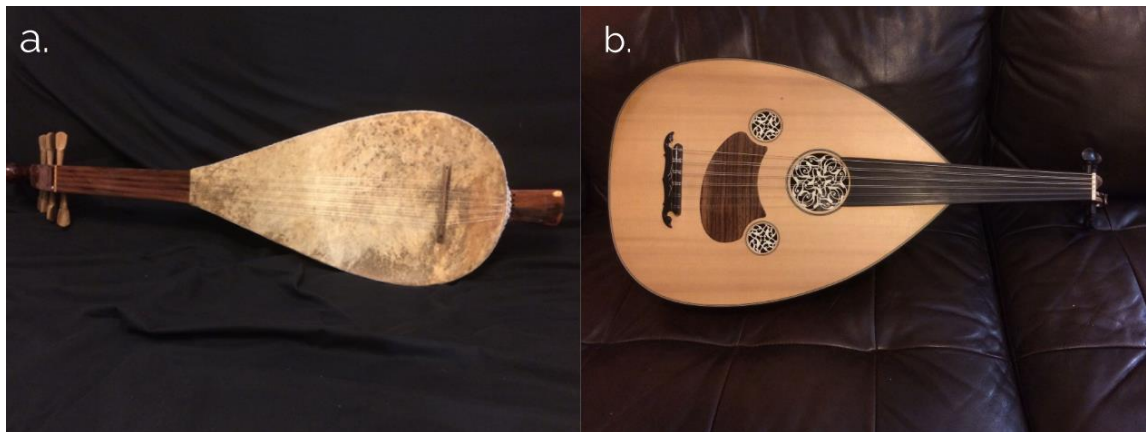


Figure 2: a) Hadhrami style *gambus*; b) Middle Eastern *oud*; also known as *gambus* in Malaysia.

The *oud*-type lutes were those I encountered most frequently in Malaysia. It is also interesting to note that the increasing influence of this type of lute replacing the Hadhrami style *gambus* corresponds with the historical growth and global influence of countries within the Organization for the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), such as Saudi Arabia, and the late-20<sup>th</sup> century revival of fundamentalist, Salafi movements emanating from these countries. In this dissertation, I generally use the blanket term, *gambus*, unless referring to specific features of

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<sup>2</sup> While the names are interchangeable, the Hadhrami style lutes are rarely referred to as “*oud*,” but the Middle Eastern *ouds* are frequently referred to as “*gambus*” as well as “*oud*.”

individual styles. I do this because *gambus* is the term I encountered most frequently among musicians in Malaysia, regardless of the historical differences between the two instruments with the names *gambus* and *oud*. The conflation of these terms and styles became part of a political performance, comprising layers of performative bytes that aligned with various local identity trajectories and transnational historical movements.

## Chapter Outline

In the opening chapter, I introduce Malaysia and its identity politics. I further introduce the history of the *gambus* and the institutions in which it is transmitted as a beacon of Malay cultural heritage. Chapter 2 reveals ways in which the *gambus* functions to highlight an Islamicate sphere of influence in the network of overlapping idioms tied to Malay identity, part of what I label a Malay music complex. I argue that the *gambus* eclipses other spheres of influence that have influenced the development of this complex, especially in the urban center of Kuala Lumpur.

Chapter 3 shows how *gambus* transmission in Kuala Lumpur validates and authenticates a Malay urban identity amid anxieties concerning the relevance of Malayness by drawing heavily on the previously discussed Islamicate sphere of influence. Chapter 4 examines the agentic forces that reveal how the *gambus* can act as such a potent symbol of Malay identity performance. Chapter 5 examines ways that *gambus* transmission processes reveal subverted Malay identity narratives through ruptures in a dominant Malay identity praxis—or norms and standards surrounding collective understandings of Malayness.

The final chapter reveals a contrasting case study that examines *gambus* transmission outside Peninsular Malaysia. This chapter reveals how the *gambus* is used to negotiate senses of indigeneity and homeland in Malay musical practices of East Malaysian Borneo. I suggest that

the contrasting modes of identity formation can be read against one another in order to understand the importance of place and environment within the symbolic ecology of Malaysian identity politics. This chapter highlights how the *gambus* frames differences between urban, rural, Peninsular, and Bornean Malay identity consciousness.

In Peninsular Malaysia, *bumiputera* (indigenous) identity is strongly dominated by Malay identity, despite the many *orang asli* (non-Malay indigenous) groups. In Borneo, *orang asli* are called *anak negeri* (“children of the nation”). In this context, *bumiputera* identity is strongly aligned with the *anak negeri*, and not the Malays. Thus, the identity politics change when viewed from different places in Malaysia based on multiple factors, including population, the natural landscape, and the wider symbolic ecology that is connected through national politics yet forms denser webs of meaning in different areas of identity performance.

### **Malay(sian) Identity Politics**

Historian Adrian Vickers asks, “Is Malay identity ‘Malay’? Could it be colonial, or even Javanese?” (2004:27). He answers, “The ruling class of the nation state of Malaysia maintains a hegemonic Malay identity based on the difference between supposedly indigenous Islamic Malays and ‘outsiders,’ namely Chinese and Indians. This identity is regarded as a natural ethnic base of the state” (ibid.). It is argued that the idea of “race” and particularly “Malay” racial identity is largely a colonial construction while at the same time local Malay elites reject colonial powers in creating their own version of hegemonic racial identity. In Malaysia, Vickers has compared this to the Javanese “occidentalism” of the Dutch, whereby certain Javanese cultural elites (*priyayi*) attempted to disavow affiliation with the colonial power in order to take the reins of modernizing a nation state (30).

Similarly in Malaysia, to this day many Malay cultural elites disregard the influence of British colonial powers, even going so far as to claim “Malaya was never colonized” (Bernama 2012). It is important to understand that while colonial constructions of race and modernity paved the way for the racial politics of Malaysia, the localization of racial concepts remains important in understanding Malay and wider Malaysian identity. In fact, the Malay ethnic group in Malaysia is conceptualized as one “race” or identity category largely for political purposes, but it comprises a population with ancestors from a variety of related subgroups, including Javanese, Minangkabau, Buginese, Banjarese, Boyanese, Kerinci, Acehnese, and other ethnolinguistic groups found throughout the Malay/Indo-Australian and Philippine archipelagos (Mohamed Anwar 2011:15).

As with Vickers’ suggestion, this chapter takes up an “alternative to state-centred or regime-centred projects” of scholars such as Benedict Anderson and John Pemberton, finding “instances where Europeans [sic] colonisers are not the principal agents of such construction” but are important in the push-and-pull of multiple spheres of identity construction (30). Further, while much of the scholarship on Islamic cultures focuses on the cultural emanations rooted in the power of organized religious movements, I intend to follow in the direction of scholars in recent years who relocate attention to “everyday social practices, global cultural encounters, and political projects that contribute to the reshaping of public life and the recasting of the political” with a focus on “Muslims’ ethical self-fashioning and everyday forms of political engagement,” however informal (Billaud 2016:504). My work reveals ways in which identity politics are negotiated within the realm of traditional performing arts transmission. These transmission processes reveal the ebb and flow of Malaysian identity politics as cast and recast amongst various global senses of modernity and localized conceptions of Malay Muslim identity.

In a young nation of about 30 million people, Malaysian media and government have placed ethnic identity in the center of its politics, pervading and informing the daily life of its citizens. Adopting multiracialism as its national platform after independence in 1957, the Malaysian government divided the country's identity into four distinct racial categories: *Bumiputera*, which includes the nebulous *bangsa Melayu*, or "Malay race," but also approximately one hundred other small indigenous groups; Chinese, the second largest population; and Indian. The fourth category is Other, which includes Eurasians, Arab-Malaysians, and anyone not fitting neatly into the previous three categories. What makes these categories all the more complicated is that ethnic identity is strongly conflated with religion in Malaysia. According to a recent estimate, Malays and smaller indigenous groups make up 58 percent of the population, Chinese 24 percent, Indians 7 percent, and Others 11 percent (CIA World Factbook 2016).

The link between ethnicity and religion is the strictest for the Malays, who are considered both Muslim and indigenous (*bumiputera*). The political power and hegemony of Malays as Muslims and as indigenous eclipses the influence of hundreds of non-Malay and largely non-Muslim groups that are also considered *bumiputera* (lit. "sons of the soil"). While religious freedom is built into Malaysia's construction, Malays must follow Shari'ah law, which in Malaysia conforms to an Islamic system of jurisprudence known as Shafi'i. It is nearly impossible for a Malay to renounce his or her status as a Muslim. Malaysian citizens must indicate their religion on their government-issued identity cards known as *kad pengenalan*. As new acquaintances offered to show me their *kad pengenalan*, I became aware of the importance of these categories, and that these identity categories are largely conflated with religious identity, especially with regard to Malay and Islamic identity.

Historian William Roff argues that the institutionalization of these strict categories is largely a result of British colonization that ended in 1957, whereby the idea of Malaysia was constructed out of an extremely diverse cultural make-up (1967). According to him, Malay nationalism took root in Peninsular Malaysia during this era. Furthermore, after the infamous Kuala Lumpur racial riots in 1969, where the Chinese opposition parties nearly overtook the dominant Malay Alliance party in general elections, the solidification of these categories became ubiquitous in government. As a response to the perceived racial imbalance in economic representation between Malays and Chinese citizens, the government enacted affirmative action legislation for *bumiputera*. This legislation strongly favored Malays. Thus, Malaysians are accustomed to negotiating many competing identity models. Not only is this identity performance reflected in the transmission of the *gambus*, but its transmission is built into the political fabric of Malaysian nationalism and citizenship.

Proponents of Malay nationalism, such as the former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, view Malays as the inheritors of the Malaysian homeland, known as the *tanah Melayu* (“Malay fatherland”). Before assuming office, the rising politician Mahathir wrote the controversial book, *The Malay Dilemma* (1970), which argues for Malay supremacy, ideas which he carried into his decades-long administration from 1981-2003. The era surrounding the publication of this book was a particularly challenging time for Malaysian racial politics. In 1971, during the administration of Prime Minister Abdul Razak Hussein (in office 1970-1976), a constitutional amendment was passed implementing affirmative action for native communities wherein Malays were explicitly placed at the top of the cultural hierarchy (Kamal 2009:14-15). Furthermore, during this period, Malay cultural dominance was solidified after *bahasa Melayu* was made the official national language and Islam the official national religion, albeit with the

acknowledgement of non-Muslims' right to practice their respective religions (Andaya and Andaya 2001:298-299). Barnard et al discuss ways that Malay identity is shaped throughout history based on various and overlapping, contested ideas of Malayness (2004). "Malay" is defined in the Constitution as a Malaysian citizen who "professes the Muslim religion, habitually speaks the Malay language, (and) conforms to Malay custom."

In Malaysia, the Peninsular "Straits Malay" identity, which traces back to the sultanate of Malacca, embodies a culturally normative and dominant notion of Malayness in Peninsular Malaysia (cf. Collins 2004). Comprising approximately 50.1 percent of the national population, this majority racial category is constitutionally defined and enjoys majority political power in Malaysia. It has been argued that three pillars of "Malayness" constitute the primary hegemonic structure through which the majority identity is constructed in Malaysia, and thus, infused within the collective imagination of the nation's plural society (Kamal 2009:15). These three pillars, language, religion, and sultan (*bahasa, agama, dan raja*) have been systematically reinforced by the Malaysian government throughout its history, in turn "Malayizing" conceptions of indigenous citizenship at the national level (ibid.). Thus, given the prominence of these pillars in Malaysian conceptions of Malay identity, I found in my fieldwork that musical genres labeled "Malay" are also couched in terms of these pillars, especially with regard to the second pillar, *agama*, or religion, which in the case of Malay identity is Islam.

Article 160 (2) of the Malaysian federal constitution defines "Malay" as a person who practices Islam (*agama Islam*), speaks the Malay language (*bahasa Melayu*), and conforms to Malay custom (*adat Melayu*).<sup>3</sup> However, as Hoffstaedter notes, "The problem with *adat* is that it

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that while the official form of Islam is not specified here, the implication is that the practice should be Sunni. While Shi'ism and other practices are not technically illegal in Malaysia, they are not encouraged, especially amongst Malays.

is too convoluted and regional in its multiple incarnations and thus does not lend itself to a unifying character” (2011:34). Given the contentious issue of Malay identity and Malay custom, I use musical transmission to delicately examine these identity issues in Malaysia. In other words, I found that through musical interactions and discussions, people were more willing to engage both discursively and not in sensitive identity issues in Malaysia.

### **Material Agency and Bodies of Transmission**

I have become especially interested in the materials of expressive culture, the tools with which—in the case of my research—*gambus* musicians extend the functionality of their own human bodies in order to make meaning through organized sound. One interesting study in cognition shows that human tools are anthropomorphized not only in the figurative imagination of human beings, but that as humans increasingly use specific tools, synapses develop that signal in the brain that these objects are literal, material extensions of the body. Frequently used tools such as automobiles are mapped in the brain identically to the ways in which the human hand is cognitively realized (Cardinali et al 2009). Musical instruments, with their rich symbolism, also become part of the person, responsible for actively creating meaning as much as the tendons in the fingers that play them.

Furthermore, in line with ethnomusicological scholarship by Bates (2012), Sonevytsky (2008), Dawe (2013), and others, I am interested in ways that materials themselves act upon human conceptual worlds by imposing physical contingencies emanating from their own kind of material agency. As I intend to show with my wider research, the agentic push and pull of these materials is often overlooked in the search for socio-cultural meaning in musical expression and performance. However, the relationship between structure and agency has been studied in the social sciences for decades.

Sociologist Anthony Giddens, in his theory of structuration, argues that human social activities are recursive, in that “they are not brought into being by social actors but continually recreated by them via the very means whereby they express themselves *as* actors” (original emphasis; 1984:2). This continuous production of social life occurs from within a host of agentic forces, both conscious and unconscious on the part of the human actor. Giddens also argues for the importance of considering “practical consciousness,” or “[w]hat actors know (believe) about social conditions” (375). I am interested in ways humans conceptualize their own agency and identity, but also how the wider symbolic ecology both constrains and produces the means by which they are able to exert this agency.

### **Field Research**

Most of my research was spent studying *gambus* transmission in Kuala Lumpur, while also spending time in the West Malaysian (Peninsular Malaysia) state of Johor and the East Malaysian (Borneo) state of Sabah. Malaysian *gambus* transmission exists today in these major regions. As I studied *gambus* transmission and its interrelated genres and idioms that are considered part of the spectrum of Malay music, I became interested in comparing *gambus* transmission in rural versus urban contexts. I soon learned that there were many differences between Malay cultural expression in KL versus outside the city, reflecting various identity dynamics amongst Malaysians and Malays throughout the country.

The principal collaborators with whom I worked included teachers and students both currently and formerly affiliated with the aforementioned institutions as well as those involved in *gambus* transmission outside of these institutions. Most of my research collaborators were part of an urban upper-middle class Malay identity, a demographic sometimes called the “New Malay,” a concept on which I elaborate later in this chapter. I focused on a particular group of urban

*gambus* musicians who were roughly divided into two artistic camps of *gambus* transmission, one focused on traditional rote transmission drawing from an array of historical and cultural influences, and a second camp that advocated for elevating Malay arts by aligning them with Middle Eastern music theory and repertoire.

My primary *gambus* teacher was Raja Zulkarnain Raja Yusof (b. 1971), or “Raja Zul,” a former teacher at ASWARA, as well as founder of the National Conservatory for the Arts and *Pertubuhan Gambus Malaysia* (Malaysian *Gambus* Organization). Raja Zul was incredibly generous with his time, driving me to concerts and workshops, giving me lessons, introducing me to many important musicians, and was generally available to *lepak* (“hang out”) with me as I picked his brain on a variety of topics.

In 2005-2006, Raja Zul was apprentice to the most famous *gambus* player in Malaysia, the late Encik Fadzil Ahmad (1941-2006). Recently, Raja Zul won the 2017 Malaysian National Book Award for “best art book” with his book on *gambus* pedagogy (Zulkarnain 2017). I first met Raja Zul on Facebook while he was managing the fan page of Encik Fadzil. Our first in-person meeting took place in July of 2013 at the *Bicara Ghazal Melayu*, a workshop on the music of the *ghazal Melayu* genre in Johor Bahru in the Malaysian state of Johor.

Raja Zul was an important contact who introduced me to other *gambus* musicians and those involved in Malay music transmission. During my time studying with Raja Zul, he introduced me to over thirty different *gambus* musicians living and performing in the Kuala Lumpur area. During the aforementioned *ghazal* workshop, he introduced me to Tuan Haji Jaafar bin Haji Ismail, or “Haji Jaafar” who works for *Yayasan Warisan Johor* (Johor Heritage Foundation), a governmental organization that promotes the cultural heritage of Johor, especially Malay traditional art forms. Haji Jaafar was instrumental in helping me understand the role of

Malay cultural heritage in these governmental organizations in my early fieldwork. Tuan Haji Jaafar introduced me to other important individuals that were integral to *muzik Melayu* transmission in Johor, including the *gambus* musician, Tuan Haji Abu Bakar bin Haji Ali (b. 1935), or “Pak Bakar.” Musicians such as Tuan Haji Jaafar and Pak Bakar have performed *ghazal* since the 1950s. During my fieldwork, Pak Bakar and Tuan Haji were less active given their advancing age. I felt fortunate to meet them and to gain some insight into *gambus* transmission and the Malay music scene in Johor. The insights I gained from them proved useful in comparing rural versus urban Malay music transmission.

Another important collaborator during my fieldwork was Pak Norihan Saif (b. 1954). Pak Norihan was a *gambus* teacher and advisor to me during research in 2015-2016. I met Pak Norihan at a *ghazal Melayu* class that he co-taught at ASWARA with another teacher, Pak Yassin Gajal (b. 1955). Both Pak Yassin and Pak Norihan were students of the renowned Fadzil Ahmad, who is often referred to as *Raja Gambus* (“*Gambus* King”) thanks to his prolific effort from the 1970s until his death in 2006 to foreground the *gambus* in Malay music recordings and in academic institutions such as ASWARA. In addition to teaching at ASWARA, Pak Norihan is an artist-in-residence at Istana Budaya where we met weekly for lessons and discussion of *gambus* and its place in *muzik Melayu*.

Raja Zulkarnain, Fadzil Ahmad, Pak Norihan, Pak Yassin, Pak Bakar, and Tuan Haji Jaafar are all from Johor, specifically the city of Muar (Raja Zul, Pak Bakar, and En. Fadzil) the district of Batu Pahat (Pak Norihan and Pak Yassin), and the Johorian capital city, Johor Bahru (Haji Jaafar). After meeting these individuals, I quickly learned that most of the *gambus* transmission in Kuala Lumpur was spawned from the efforts to preserve Malay cultural heritage in Johor. I began making trips with Raja Zul and others to Johor to attend cultural productions

such as weddings and state events such as the Coronation of the Sultan of Johor, all of which featured the *gambus*.

In my frequent participation in classes and lessons, I met many student musicians with whom Fadzil Ahmad, Haji Jaafar, Pak Bakar, Pak Norihan, Pak Yassin, and Raja Zul worked. I was fortunate to meet and collaborate with over thirty *gambus* students, and even more non-*gambus* music and dance students. Other musicians with whom I worked were independent and not affiliated with an academic institution, but nonetheless played key roles in helping me understand the *gambus* and music transmission in Malaysia. Some of the most influential of these musicians and students include Luk Ahmad, Ismail Alsaber, Mohamad Zulhafis bin Zulkefly, Amirah Ali, Muhammad Najmie, Kamal Sabran, Fauziah Suhaili, Firlany Malik, Adilla Fauzi, Azrin Abdullah, Talib Ahmat, Teuku Umar Ilany, Jamie Chik, and others too numerous to list.

My fieldwork in 2015-2016 was based primarily in the Malaysian capital of Kuala Lumpur, which is located on the Peninsula in West Malaysia, and home to approximately two million residents. I found that Kuala Lumpur was a hub for the perpetuation of what it means to transmit Malay cultural heritage through the arts. To pursue the production of Malay cultural heritage through *gambus* transmission I conducted participant observation research at several government-supported institutions in KL. These included the *Muzium Negara* (National Museum), *Istana Budaya* (“Cultural Palace”/National Theatre), *Akademi Seni Budaya Dan Warisan Kebangsaan* (National Academy of Arts, Culture, and Heritage) (ASWARA), *Universiti Malaya* (University of Malaya) (UM), *Jabatan Kebangsaan Kebudayaan Negara* (National Department for Culture and Arts) (JKKN), and several other universities and non-governmental arts institutions. After settling in, I quickly developed a full-time schedule of

attending cultural events, concerts, lessons, classes, press conferences, television and radio promotions, and a film premiere, activities that became transmission sites of their own, including and transcending the aforementioned institutional sites. During one television appearance with my teacher, Raja Zulkarnain, the *oud* was positioned as a local Malay traditional art form on the television program, *Orang Kita* (“Our People”) (see Figure 3).



Figure 3: Author with teacher, Raja Zulkarnain Raja Yusof on Malaysian public television. 12 October 2015. Photo courtesy of Raja Zulkarnain Raja Yusof.

All of the aforementioned governmental institutions with which I worked fell under the administration of the *Kementerian Pelancongan dan Kebudayaan Malaysia* (“Malaysian Ministry of Tourism and Culture”) (KPKM). According to the KPKM website, the ministry’s first objective is “To strengthen the arts, culture and heritage towards enhancing national unity based on the National Cultural Policy.” The National Culture Policy was developed in 1971 as a response to significant political and racial tensions that occurred between Malay and non-Malay citizens, reaching its apex in the 1969 Malaysian riots in Kuala Lumpur. This policy states the following goals for an assimilated national Malaysian culture:

1. The national culture of Malaysia must be based on the cultures of the people indigenous to the region;
2. elements from other cultures which are suitable and reasonable may be incorporated into the national culture; and
3. Islam will be an important element in the national culture (Tan 1992:283).

Keeping these goals in mind, I entered these institutional sites to examine how Malay culture is framed within this national framework and how the *gambus* is tied to Malaysian identity discourses, particularly Muslim Malayness.

### **The Production of Urban Cultural Institutions in Kuala Lumpur**

While living in Kuala Lumpur, I stayed in a neighborhood known as Pantai Dalam. The LRT follows the *Lebuhraya Persekutuan* (Federal Highway) through Pantai Dalam where there are many low-income housing projects. At one time, this area comprised mostly squatter slums filled with regional migrants from rural areas in Malaysia comprising mainly Indian and Malay laborers, but also immigrant groups from neighboring Indonesia. In the late 1960s and 1970s, approximately one-third of Kuala Lumpur's population comprised "squatters" living in these makeshift shantytowns (Guan 2015:258). It was during this same era that the Malaysian government began shaping anti-squatting legislation (ibid.). However, it was not until the early to mid-1990s, when Malaysia's economy was relatively prosperous, that these policies were strictly enforced as part of Malaysia's aspirations towards industrialization and Kuala Lumpur's becoming a "world class city" (Guan 2015:258). The enforcement of these policies largely involved forcing squatters into low-income housing developments, many of which still exist along Old Klang Road, the oldest road connecting KL to the old Port Klang (Nadarajah 2004:73).

I stayed near several of these "urban *kampungs* (villages)" in Pantai Dalam and the nearby Kampung Kerinchi area during my longest period of fieldwork in 2015-2016. Throughout these housing projects are woven freeways, shopping malls, office buildings, and luxury hotels, forming nexuses of the global and the local, modernity and tradition, and intra-ethnic class distinctions. In this dynamic urban environment, I noted complexities of ethnic, regional, class,

and generational identity constructs revealed through competing performative forms of modernity in the institutions with which I worked. These complexities manifested amongst a generally affluent, upper-middle class demographic of artists.

When I first visited Kuala Lumpur in 2011, Pantai Dalam was still predominantly a low-income residential area. During my most recent phase of fieldwork in 2015-2016, I found that this area was relabeled “Bangsar South,” a real estate marketing tactic intended to associate the area with the trendy and affluent neighborhood to the north, known as Bangsar. Hotels, shopping centers, restaurants, office buildings, and a prominent beacon of modernity, the *Telekom Malaysia* telecommunications tower, which I could view from outside my apartment building, dotted the area in a continuous phase of urban development (see Figure 4). Amid this development I often gazed at the bustling squatter camp closest to my residence. After visiting the camp and talking to its residents, I learned that it housed mostly itinerant laborers hired to work at various construction sites in the area, an example of a mutually-reinforcing social class chasm in KL.



Figure 4: Telekom Malaysia communications tower. Accessed 20 February 2017. Photo courtesy of The Star Online <<http://www.thestar.com/my/business/business-news/2015/12/18/tm-to-invest-rm23bil/>>.

One of the earliest and still extant modernizing developments in the area is the building known as *Angkasapuri*, the headquarters of the Malaysian Ministry of Information, which I also passed almost daily on my commutes to and from downtown KL. Built in the 1960s, *Angkasapuri* is also home to Malaysia's primary media outlet, Radio Television Malaysia (RTM). As a primary media outlet, RTM has and continues to be a major part of Malaysia's nation building project. In 2009, the department combined with the Ministry of Unity, Culture, Arts, and Heritage and the Communications component from the Ministry of Energy, Water, and Communications to become the *Kementerian Penerangan, Komunikasi dan Kebudayaan*, or "Ministry of Information, Communication, and Culture." In 2013, the cultural component was removed from this ministry and combined with tourism to form the *Kementerian Pelancongan dan Kebudayaan Malaysia* (Ministry of Culture and Tourism) (KPKM). As mentioned above,

this branch of government manages most of the institutions with which I was involved in Kuala Lumpur, including ASWARA, the National Museum, and *Istana Budaya*.

Part of the responsibility of this ministry was to promote “unity in diversity,” part of recent Malaysian tourism efforts and associated with Prime Minister Najib Razak’s now infamous and scandal-plagued “1Malaysia” development and promotional campaign. This campaign is a continuation of former PM Mahathir’s *Wawasan 2020* (Vision 2020) and subsequent capital development scheme under former PM Abdullah Badawi, which immediately preceded Najib’s administration that began in 2013. This purported goal of the KPKK, uniting Malaysia’s pluralistic society, was salient for me given that my research focused on identity politics.

The theme was reinforced each time I took the LRT past the *Angkasapuri* building, which brandished the “1Malaysia” sign on the top of the building, along with various topiaries below featuring a partial staff notation of Malaysia’s national anthem, “*Negaraku* (My Country)” and another topiary that read, “*Wawasan 2020*” (see Figure 5). The front of the building reads, “*Wawasan 2020*,” and thus the opposing sides represent major eras in Malaysia’s modernizing project that coincided with Mahathir and Najib’s administrations.



Figure 5: a) Front entrance to *Angkasapuri*, featuring the "Wawasan 2020 (Vision 2020)" slogan. b) Back of building visible from the LRT train and Federal Highway. The topiary below reads, "*Negaraku* (My Country)," the title of the Malaysian national anthem. The topiary also features partial staff notation of the melody. July 2015. Photo by Joseph Kinzer.

Another institution that developed early on in this area was the *Universiti Malaya*, which was founded under British Malaya in 1949 (see Figure 6). Following race riots that occurred on 13 May 1969, when Chinese-based opposition parties gained significant ground over the Malay-dominated Alliance party, the university became a site of multiracial demonstrations imploring unity through marching and song (*Berita Harian* 1969:1). While these demonstrations were largely peaceful, some notable escalations occurred resulting in the arrest of several students on the charge of "rioting" (*ibid.*) Also in response to the racial tensions during this year, some anti-Chinese individuals reportedly hurled bricks at oncoming traffic from the freeway overpass near the UM campus (personal communication, James Collins, 5 February 2017). The aforementioned squatter camps and early institutions such as *Angkasapuri* and *Universiti Malaya* represent two sides of Malaysian social life that began early in Malaysia's history. The class and racial tensions remain a ubiquitous part of identity performance in not only the national Malaysian political arena, but in the daily lives of its citizens.



Figure 6: Universiti Malaya campus built in 1949. Accessed 20 February 2017. Photo courtesy of S/pores: New Directions in Singapore Studies <<http://s-spore.com/2008/02/generations/>>.

### **Malays in Urban Malaysian Institutions**

My former professor and Malay linguist, James Collins, described the social chasm that separated the institutional culture and the surrounding residential areas. He says, “One Sunday morning in 1968 I borrowed a bike and drove from *Jalan Kelang Lama* [Old Klang Road] to the UM campus. It was a vast green garden, quiet and well maintained. I met only Chinese and Indians” (personal communication, 5 February 2017). After 1969, Malay political leaders contended that “education can produce greater social equity and justice” and thus affirmative action policies were implemented, shifting the student population at places such as UM to include more Malays, whereas previously many of the Malays that moved to the city from the largely agrarian and rural areas were impoverished and living in the aforementioned squatter camps (Selvaratnam 1988:173). Affirmative action policies created more opportunities for Malays in middle income positions, but these policies remained controversial as many who made up the low income areas of contemporary urban Malaysia, including lower social stratum, non-

English educated Malays and other *bumiputera*, feel left out. These English-educated, upper-middle class city-dwellers are often called the “New Malay,” which comprised the largest sample of my research participants.

In May of 1969 in Kuala Lumpur, factions of Malay nationalism were becoming increasingly institutionalized. At the same time Chinese-led opposition groups were led against the Malay elites, though not as organized or solidified as the Malay nationalist campaigns (Lee 1990:491). Nevertheless, non-Malay opposition parties gained significant victories in the 1969 general election. It was their victory parades and celebration that prompted anger from particularly nationalist Malays, leading to violent racial clashing (*ibid.*). The crux of the 1969 race riots rested on the growing resentment between Chinese and Malay political groups that was spurred after the oppositional, non-Malay parties performed well in the preceding election. After that time, “the government has been wary of inflaming communal tensions and permitting unbridled freedom of speech” (Lockard 1998:217).

The major growth of Malaysia’s post-colonial economy has largely depended on Chinese Malaysian businesses. As a result of this imbalance, the Malay ruling class enacted affirmative action legislation, which was considered necessary to rectify a perceived deprivation of the country’s largest ethnic group. In British Malaya, Malays were characterized as “lazy natives” by British authorities. As a result, administrative positions were filled by Chinese and Indian groups, while the Malay nobility was reinforced to symbolically mirror a British-style constitutional monarchy (Alatas 1977). The British were clever in creating internal divisions within Indian Malaysian workers by exploiting the caste system and building hierarchy into plantation operations (Willford 2007). The Chinese on the other hand, though fragmented in their

political organization, were more economically unified than their Indian counterparts (Lee 1990:492)

Chinese-owned shops were important in Kuala Lumpur's early years as Malaysia's capital city. Chinese businesses were responsible for expanding much of Malaysia's export economy, with large stakes in the tin, rubber, and later technology industries. Seeking to rectify the perceived racial imbalance, affirmative action policies were enacted granting a quota of administrative jobs in government institutions to *bumiputera* (lit. "sons of the soil") citizens. Since the *bumiputera* category was dominated by a politically unified Malay demographic, this Malay hegemony tended to further disenfranchise non-Malay indigenous groups rather than elevate their economic status. Thus, these policies fomented a growing resentment against an emergent, English-educated "new Malay" middle class that held sway in Malaysian institutions, including the leading political power in government, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO). Furthermore, not only was there a divide between Malay and non-Malay groups, but many rural Malays felt left out of the mainstream Malay political spectrum, often seen through a Marxist lens as a continuation of British imperialism.

### **Malay Identity in Gambus Transmission: Two Camps**

I observed musicians not simply performing a unified Malay identity through *gambus* performance, but instead found internal division, similar to the division between the "old" and "new" Malay described above. During my fieldwork I recognized two major camps of *gambus* musician, one that privileged an attitude of preservation of Malay music based in localized popular conceptions of Malay cultural history, and another that sought to push Malay music into transnational realms of global music production, including the complex interplay between global influences of the West and the Middle East. Not surprisingly, the former camp is more tied to a

rural Malay culture and Malay custom (*adat*), one less conscious of these global influences, while the latter is tied to a more global, urban framework. These are two broadly imagined categories of Malay musician, i.e., musicians who are not only Malay but perform music associated with Malay identity. As my teacher, Raja Zulkarnain, explained to me, some *gambus* musicians are content to stay in Malaysia and “play the same songs they always play,” while some are global musicians who travel abroad and bring back new influences with “different stories to tell,” “pushing Malay music into the future” (personal communication, 18 November 2015). These sentiments reflect the internal struggle I found operative in multiple sites of *gambus* transmission in Malaysia. I return to these internal struggles amongst Malay identity production throughout this dissertation.

While the individuals in these camps did not explicitly promote any explicitly religious agenda, they found themselves caught up in the salient religious dialogue of current Malaysian politics and the wider Islamicate world. I should also note that these camps were not strictly opposed, and some aspects of one fit into the other with individuals finding themselves performing and aligning with sensibilities of one or both. Nonetheless, the dichotomy useful to situate musicians within the wider political discourse.

The traditional *adat Melayu* (Malay custom) camp was situated more within a traditionalist form of Sunni Islam known as *Islam Hadhari*, or “Civilizational Islam,” which advocates a progressive attitude of accommodation and integration with a pluralistic and balanced society while adhering to basic principles of the *Qur’an* and *Shariah* law for Muslims (see Gatsiounis 2006). This camp drew heavily from a syncretic blend of Malay musical influences. I found that the latter camp was associated with a more Arab Sunni Islamic cultural influence increasingly portrayed throughout the Islamicate world as a conservative alternative to

radical Salafism. Musically, this camp drew from a modernist pan-Arab idea of Islamicate artistic cultural influence and history, which included aspects of music theory, instrumentation, and repertoire. Both of these streams of influence were bound up in what has been called a mainstream “moderate” or “liberal,” though nonetheless conservative, Sunni Islam in Malaysia.

This rhetoric was especially promoted by the recent administration of the dominant Malay political party (UMNO) under Prime Minister Najib Razak, as opposed to streams of more conservative Sunni movements characterized by the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) (Ahmad Fauzi 2015:311). While these recent manifestations characterize Malaysian Islam as a liberal approach to religious politics, many view Najib’s Islamic rhetoric as ambiguous, pandering to global capitalistic partnerships and Western political sensibilities while also bowing to conservative political pressure from religious factions (314). I explore how individuals navigate their own identity in a place where politics demand they perform some version of Malay Muslim identity through virtually any personal or professional endeavor. Individuals responded to these compulsions in traditionalist versus progressive ways by aligning with different kinds musical influences.

### **Performance and Discourse in Gambus Transmission**

Ethnomusicologist Tom Turino distinguishes between two musical contexts that he calls *participatory* versus *presentational*, respectively defined as “a special type of artistic practice in which there are no artist-audience distinctions, only participants and potential participants performing different roles,” contrasted with “situations where one group of people, the artists, prepare and provide music for another group, the audience, who do not participate in making the music or dancing” (2008:26). In addition to some work in rural areas of the states of Johor and Sabah, most of my fieldwork observations took place from within universities and broader

cultural institutions in the Kuala Lumpur metropolitan area. These institutions were dedicated to promoting local and traditional arts in Malaysia. I found that while the intention behind *gambus* transmission in these settings was usually presentational in nature, the discursive components of these settings that frequently occurred offstage were participatory in the sense that musicians were eager to engage in a performative dialogue about the presentation of *gambus* music.

In Malaysia, identity transmission processes were bound up with *gambus* transmission process that took place in instrument workshops, television and radio broadcasts, as well as at concerts, festivals, museum exhibits, and even a film premiere. Some of my most significant fieldwork took place in coffee shops, restaurants, and street food stalls as I interviewed musicians over coffee, tea, and an array of Malaysian culinary delights. The dialogues bound up in the materio-symbolic frameworks of these settings emerged to me as a rich network of social identity production in Malay(sian) culture.

Each time a moment of identity performance emerged within what I call the symbolic ecology, I began to view it as a coalescence and as a performative event, a neo-ritualized ceremony that Malays might call a *majlis*, an Arabic-derived Malay term combining ideas of “ceremony,” “gathering,” and “event” that I discuss in more detail in Chapter 3. These performative moments, or *gambus* transmission events became barometers of cultural contestations and identity politics beyond Kuala Lumpur. Having spent the last decade involved in some manner with higher education, it was only natural for me to begin my search for the *gambus* in institutions such as The National Academy of Arts Culture and Heritage (ASWARA), especially given the complexity of grappling with the array of socio-cultural influences in the urban metropolis of Kuala Lumpur. As an aspiring ethnomusicologist, I felt that doing so was my only chance to gain any sort of emic foothold in a field site. It became important, and

practical, that I tether myself to institutions. Furthermore, I found that the categories and classifications of cultural identity found within these institutions remained salient as modes through which individuals understood and negotiated their various subjectivities.

The arts institution—both physically and conceptually as I will explore further in this dissertation—is a living vestige of post-colonial nation building, specifically dedicated to the study of presentational music and wider expressive forms. It has been widely noted amongst scholars that Malaysia’s identity politics loom large in the daily lives of its citizens (see Barnard 2004; Weiss 2015). Thus, in such a presentational setting, I studied the conscious and subconscious negotiation of identity construction based on race and nationalist categories particularly pronounced. Furthermore, traditional expressive forms throughout Southeast Asia resist strict categorization. Forms such as music, dance, theatre, poetry, folklore, and even martial arts all tend to overlap in complex expressive networks. In arts institutions, departments/faculties of dance, music, and theatre are inorganically separated. Thus, the institutional framework inherently disperses rather than integrates idioms and reflects conflicting identity politics over not only racial and other identity categories but categories surrounding conceptions of the arts more generally.

### **Analytical Framework**

As I conducted fieldwork in various institutions, I soon became aware of the potent symbolic power of the material components of the *gambus* lute, including its physical construction and design. I began to think of a field site in the most abstract sense, where instruments, people, acoustics, and other material “bodies” were as much field sites as any institutionalized concept of the field as a specific locale. This materio-symbolic conceptualization of a field site became an important theme in my analytical framework for this

dissertation. Furthermore, I began to think of transmission in its widest sense, one that includes a symbolic ecology of material and human bodies.

### *Symbolic Ecology*

This dissertation operates on the premise that identity formations are relational, that they are enacted and constructed based on varying modes of agentic formations that emerge through what I have called a symbolic ecology. I examine symbol-to-meaning relationships, revealing practical, incidental, physiological, and material connections that influence the power of meaning-making agents of cultural expression, agents that include the brain and wider human body; natural, built, and virtual environments; musical instruments and their surrounding materials; and instruments' relative stability in individual, categorical imaginings of overlapping cultural processes. These processes, I submit, form a symbolic ecology. I propose that the symbolic ecology is important for understanding the agency behind the symbolic power of music as it is mapped to identity categories and conceptions of self in the Malaysian milieu. Furthermore, understanding the symbolic ecology of music transmission elucidates ways in which musical expression enacts its own unique kind of cultural ecology, overlapping and bound to other cultural spheres, but more than an epiphenomenal reflection of those spheres.

In this dissertation, I show that the ecology of music's materials comprises indirect, incidental agentic forces, a process of formation that I call "incidental signification." Ethnomusicologist Jocelyne Guilbault suggests that ethnomusicologists think of music and politics as intertwined, where music is "not merely 'musical,' but also economic, social, gendered, and so on" (2014:322). She argues that ethnomusicological studies of the "plural and distinct economies that animate musical practices" are important contributions that ethnomusicologists can make to social theory (ibid.). As I explain in the pages to come, my

interpretation of *gambus* transmission as comprising a “plural and distinct” ecology of agency in music transmission expands anthropological theory focusing on material economies by focusing on the emergence and exchange of symbolic capital within primarily urban spaces.

My approach to a symbolic ecology utilizes methods that are similar to, for example, the Chicago School of sociological thought, which focuses largely on how individuals are shaped by the environment, including the symbolism that emerges in physical structures in urban environments that motivate human behavior beyond conscious agency and genetic factors (see Tomasi 1998). As sociologist Peter J.M. Nas explains, the Chicago School examines the “spatial distribution of all sorts of social phenomena in urban areas” by examining the “distribution of symbols in city space” (1992:178). My approach gives special attention to how symbols emerge through musical materials and conceptual objects, and not only the way in which these symbols are arranged. Quite often the “stuff of symbols,” such as the availability of a type of wood, is overlooked when analyzing seemingly readymade symbolic objects, both conceptual and material, and I engage in analysis that moves beyond ideas of human intentionality. Nonetheless, I do recognize that human agents, such as the musicians involved in the transmission of *gambus* music, engage and work with these readymade symbols—as well as the identity categories they invoke—without always consciously considering their eco-logic.

### *Liminality in Cultural Transmission Sites*

Anthropologist Victor Turner discusses how liminal rituals have been replaced by liminoid processes in industrial societies (1979). In other words, rituals of personal and social transformation as part of an integration and maintenance of a particular, usually religious community, while still extant, become less salient in increasingly cosmopolitan, pluralistic, and

industrial contemporary societies. As a part of this phenomenon, ritualistic aspects of institutions provide a platform for transition and identity negotiation through *play* (54). As Turner distinguishes, “One *works* at the liminal, one *plays with* the liminoid” (ibid., original emphasis). I view arts institutions as liminoid spaces, which I define as presentational spaces that individuals enter in order to undergo a social transformation, a rite of passage for cultural standard bearers in order to become authorized to *play* with cultural categories.

Western-modeled institutions with stated goals of teaching and preserving Southeast Asian arts traditions (among others) become literal and figurative stages for expressive collisions of identity construction. An institution committed to upholding Malaysian traditions provides a site wherein contestations of national, racial, and other manifestations of identity politics unfold. Furthermore, because Malaysia’s socio-political system is formed around conflating racial and religious identity categories, I find that these liminoid settings, while purportedly secular, play with religious and ethnic identities through a kind of neoritualized, liminoid performance site.

In my view, neorituals performed at liminoid sites, such as a music classroom, carry out important cultural work in negotiating contemporary identities in a plural Malaysia society. In the case of my research, I focus on Malay identity concepts, which have a complex history. I see the transmission of Malay culture in institutions as a way of reconciling a complex history of identity construction that is directly linked to fading sites of similar cultural transmission and maintenance usually located in the *kampung*, or rural village districts of Malaysia. A major theme of this dissertation is the contrast between rural Malay identity and custom (*adat Melayu*) and the idea of a “new Malay” (*Melayu baharu*) identity that is associated with urban centers (see Thompson 2003). I am particularly interested in liminoid presentations of Malay traditional arts, because as I have explained, Malaysia’s political system is built around racial identity

categories, the most contentious of which is what is known as the Malay race (*bangsa Melayu*). Thus, these categories are ingrained in the national consciousness and play out on the liminoid, institutional stage.

### *Schema Theory*

Psychologist Albert Bregman defines a schema as “a control structure in the human brain that is sensitive to some frequently occurring pattern, either in the environment, in ourselves, or how the two interact” (cited in Lemay 1995:40). I surmise that people, especially in an urban and cosmopolitan context such as Kuala Lumpur, are increasingly apt to making quick identity distinctions through schemas. This aptitude is especially honed in a contemporary world that offers a constant barrage of new and changing stimuli, thereby affecting this tendency in the human brain in both positive and negative ways. As anthropologists Claudia Strauss and Naomi Quinn describe, “In large measure information processing is mediated by learned or innate mental structures that organize related pieces of knowledge” (1997:49). People learn about their world through previously formed schemas and draw from these to develop new ones. Overlapping schemas are always in flux and the brain is highly plastic in this regard (*ibid.*). As an icon of Islamic cultural history, the *gambus* ties Malay cultural heritage to the wider Islamicate world while securing its central place in localized Malaysian cultural practice.

I view the pervasiveness of identity categories and their negotiation in sites of cultural transmission as a reflection of humans’ orientation towards thinking about the world through schemas. As philosopher Thomas Hobbes understood, the subjects in a power model have to agree that there are certain advantages to the system, i.e., handing over authority to a group (cited in Hampton 1988:266). My assumption is that the predilection that humans have for thinking

according to schemas helps people feel that such categorical and institutional models are relevant to them.

In philosopher Kitarō Nishida's cultural schema theory, he identifies several primary types of overlapping schemas through which people engage in social interaction, utilizing previous cultural knowledge to fill in "gaps in the currently available information" to form new schemas (2007:405). These schemas form the fluid fabric by which values, concepts, social roles, self-understanding, and norms and standards of behavior in different socio-cultural contexts are enacted. Overlapping schemas of identity formation in *gambus* transmission are bound up with different roles, understandings, and parameters of self, value, culture, and society. Furthermore, these schemas shift and transform within the liminoid spaces in which I examined *gambus* transmission. These sites are ritualized spaces where schemas are enacted and transformed to create cultural standard bearers in society.

As schema theory suggests, humans are apt to think in terms of categorical expectation in order to understand how their own subjectivities fit within a wider social framework. Thus, when well-worn schemas are disrupted, previously silent schemas are highlighted by contrast to more pervasive ones, which can lead to a better understanding of how identity is negotiated in new contexts. For example, in Western-modeled arts institutions, such as ASWARA, there is an expectation for teachers to have certain kinds of musical knowledge. One example is the ability to read staff notation. When a purported cultural expert in a musical tradition is hired at such an institution without having this kind of knowledge, the schematic expectation of the role of the conservatory music instructor is disrupted. However, because the cultural expert's knowledge is perceived as belonging to a long history of traditional music transmission outside the academy, the teacher carries new schematic frameworks that contain a unique kind of cultural capital. This

thesis explores the negotiation of previously and newly formed schemas in contemporary urban contexts of music transmission.

### *Performative Transmission Bytes*

As a tool for understanding what connects and constitutes expressive phenomena, I propose breaking down complex articulations of value into digestible bites, which I call “performative transmission bytes (or bites).” I like “byte” because the metaphor connotes information storage, in this case cultural identity information. However, I do not intend that the metaphor be understood to the extent that bytes are fixed storage units, like digital bytes in computer programming, which comprise smaller bits. In this way, I like the more abstract idea of a “bite” as a digestible unit of cultural data, much like the commonly invoked term in popular culture, “sound bite.” The holistic understanding of bytes is similar to gestalt philosophy in the sense that small units can convey and transmit larger meaning. In my conception, performative transmission bytes are units of cultural identity information that connect schemas and form new ones. In this way, performative transmission bytes are comparable to neurotransmitters that bridge synapses in the cultural brain or body politic. A performative transmission byte is the smallest qualitatively measurable—i.e., knowable—unit in a framework of understanding. The concept of a byte is a practical way to denote the smallest apprehendable unit of meaning making. Performative bytes can be used as what sociologist Stuart Hall might call “enunciative strategies” of identity discourse, where discourse and transmission of cultural information are both considered in their most inclusive sense (Hall 2013:4). In keeping with the vocabulary of this dissertation, I refer to these as performative strategies, emphasizing the wide definition of identity transmission. I argue that by looking at these small, knowable moments of identity performance we can understand the agency that provides the organizing force of schemas, signs,

and wider cultural codes. They are points of articulation that hold the capacity to bridge old and new iterations of meaning. A performative transmission byte is a qualitative concept applied to a small unit of meaning, which lends understanding to its agency. Thus, a byte is not static and may change based on the analytical focus.

In the case of the *gambus*, these bytes are layered, storing performative identity information in the materials involved in its construction, in its *timbre*, and other acoustic properties, as well as its position and functionality in Malay music ensembles, social events, and the wider urbanscape. Bytes are nested within one another and function together to gain momentum in transmitting cultural identity. Thus, the *gambus* itself is a byte that transmits cultural information within other performative bytes, such as commercial advertisements, weddings, museum exhibits, or radio and television broadcasts. Furthermore, depending on how it conveys meaning in a given context, the *gambus* can be a single byte as described above or a sequence of bytes, or units conveying information through its physical and acoustic properties.

Musically, bytes can be any conceivable unit of sound meaning, including timbres, rhythmic motifs, or melodies, such as the three-note trope known as the “Oriental riff.”<sup>4</sup> These bytes are like leitmotifs that transmit certain kinds of identity information. While these bytes are usually stereotypical, they can also be used to add nuance to identity categories. When it comes to cultural identities, concepts are framed and reframed based on the work of these bytes, which are increasingly condensed yet fecund and loaded with meaning. I consider, for example, the *gambus* clip before the *adhan* broadcasted on the radio, which I referenced earlier in the introduction, is a performative transmission byte. Each time this short *gambus* clip is indexed

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<sup>4</sup> This riff is found in numerous places in popular entertainment, famously rendered by the sound of a flute towards the beginning of Carl Douglas’ 1974 hit, “Kung Fu Fighting.”

with the Islamic call to prayer, Malay Muslim cultural identities are tethered to the wider Islamicate world.

Performative transmission bytes are not stored in a single person's memory, but are a part of a collective understanding that is tweaked and reiterated based on the symbolic ecology of identity formations. Human brains depend on the social network of information and the information stored in objects. Performative transmission bytes are both conceptual and physical objects that embody cultural knowledge stored in collective schematic and agentic processes.

Bytes are similar to signs, but I expand the definition. Philosopher Ferdinand de Saussure saw the relationship between signifier and signified as an arbitrary relationship based on social convention and fluid enough to be affected by individual limitations and access to linguistic [or wider expressive] knowledge (Gasparov 2013:152). I expand this definition of signs via the performative transmission bytes concept in order to more fully recognize agency outside of human intention and social convention, yet bound up with it.

Other scholars have used similar concepts to capture the socio-cultural information found in small, transient, and performative units, such as Georg Simmel's notion of "momentary images," or Nilüfer Gole's "snapshots," concepts that I discovered through the work of anthropologist Julie Billaud's work on Muslim identity in Britain (2016). Gole suggests that "snapshots are a methodological gateway for reproducing the significance of the ocular and the corporeal" (509). Bytes are snapshots, but inclusive beyond the "ocular and corporeal" to include any epistemological units that store cultural information by drawing on a complex framework of agency to perform/enact identity in a given historical moment.

The concept I am outlining here moves beyond simply responding to predecessors or engaging in new ways with different kinds of expression. Performative transmission bytes, I

submit, materialize specific relationships between sites of meaning. For example, the physical construction of a Turkish *oud* was often cited by my teachers and fellow students as more durable and playable than any extant Malay *gambus*. Thus, this incidental force becomes an embodied site that propels and binds broad associative schemas, as broad as ideas of transnational Islamic cultural formations.

Paying close attention to minute yet powerful material performative transmission bytes widens the interpretive lens and avoids placing too much emphasis on the most mediated meanings associated with cultural expression, such as the mass mediated idea that racial categories in Malaysia are clearly divided and do not overlap. Often units of cultural transmission are located at the junctures where the performative fluidity of rigid identity concepts emerge. These material bytes include physical, acoustic, and cognitive sites that are part of the material environment. These bytes/sites contribute to a unique burst of dense and relatively stable cultural information that contributes to wider institutional systems of meaning, while also transcending the perceived hyper-rigidity of these categorical identity structures.

Performative transmission bytes test epistemological limits in holistic understandings of identity and the agentic forces at work in their emergent circuitry. Bytes are tools that allow a closer look, if metaphorical, look into Kant's *noumena*— the underlying reality of all phenomena, the reality without the observer. Or perhaps the hierarchical idea that some realities lie in the higher order without the observer is broken down with conceptual tools that shake the epistemological ground of “naming and knowing” (cf. Leary 1995). Jane Bennett discusses a tool that lends to breaching the surface of the unknowable in the qualitative constructions of identity. She refers to what natural historians call a *jizz*, a term etymologically related to the word “gist,” of certain species of animals (2010:99). She mentions bird watchers' abilities to almost

magically identify a species by a quick and subtle combination of characteristics that the watcher is unable to fully articulate. Quoting Jamie Lorimer, she defines this phenomenon as “the unique combination of properties...that allows its ready identification and differentiation from others” (ibid.). She continues:

In a vital materialism, an anthropomorphic element in perception can uncover a whole world of resonances and resemblances—sounds and sights that echo and bounce far more than would be possible were the universe to have a hierarchical structure. We at first may see only a world in our own image, but what appears next is a swarm of ‘talented’ and vibrant materialities (including the seeing self) (ibid.).

I quote Bennett at length because it is this gist, or impression of identity that I believe is formed by elements so subtly combined, nuanced, and small that human agents are not always or necessarily fully conscious of their creations. Furthermore, I hypothesize in line with Bennett that the meaning we find in the world is based on a push and pull of agentic forces that lie beneath and in addition to conscious, human agency.

While the concept of performative transmission bytes is related to discussions of meaning and identity in the theoretical models of cultural schema theory (Nishida 1999), semiotics (Turino 2008; Peirce 1991; Barthes 1977; Eco 1979), actor network theory (Roda 2015; Latour 2005), systems theory (Parsons 1967), and certainly others, this concept is useful to me as a way to circumvent the obligation to engage with all the complicated taxonomies that these theoretical models produce. Given that my entire discussion involves a complicated and often obfuscating web of social identity politics, I avoid adding more classificatory systems to my analysis of identity categorization. Thus, my theoretical approach is eclectic while narrowing the focus to a few analytical concepts, primarily the concept of the performative transmission byte and the symbolic ecology from which they emerge and with which they recombine. The next chapter

highlights the symbolic ecology of a Malay music complex and the role of the *gambus* in binding genres and idioms within it.

## Chapter 2: The Emergence of the Gambus and its Related Genres

This chapter provides an overview of the development of the *gambus* and its related genres of *Melayu* (Malay) music in contemporary Malaysia. There are many loosely defined genres that fall under the umbrella term, *Melayu*, both within Malaysia and the wider Malay-speaking world, which includes Southern Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei. For many of my research participants in KL, the label “*Melayu*” or “Malay” best encapsulated the genres of *gambus* music discussed in this chapter. The genres of Malay music discussed here epitomize what Tan and Matusky label “syncretic traditions” of Malaysian music, embodying overlapping historical periods and cultural spheres that are mapped onto Malay cultural identity (2004). In this chapter, I identify three major spheres of global influence that have shaped the historical formation of a Malay music complex and its contemporary manifestations, with specific reference to the genres that include the *gambus*. These overlapping spheres include Western, Indic, and Islamicate global spheres. I argue that the Islamicate sphere of influence eclipses other spheres in urban Malay music transmission through the symbolic ecology *gambus*.

Soon after moving to Kuala Lumpur in March 2015 and meeting several fellow *gambus* students living and studying in the area, I was added to a Whatsapp chat group for *gambus* players. The group administrator named the group, #*GengTabligh*, or “[Hashtag] Gang of Missionaries,” a reference to the traditionalist Islamic proselytizing movement that began in early 20th century in India, known as *Tablighi Jamaat* and popular in many Southeast Asian countries including Malaysia (see Figure 7). This Sunni movement advocates for a renewed attention to the Qur’an and Hadith (Sayings of the Prophet) in daily life of Muslims around the world. Interestingly, the discussion in this chat group was always exclusively *gambus*-related, and never religious in content. Ethnomusicologist Margaret Kartomi distinguishes “arts with the

Muslim theme” versus “arts with a Muslim flavor,” where the former includes music with explicit religious content, while the latter is guided by Islamic cultural elements, though not explicitly religious (2011:269). I found that *gambus* music falls into the latter category, “arts with a Muslim flavor,” and that musicians negotiated their often-secular urban identity with religious models in their performances and self-promotion.

While the music related to the *gambus* has many historical and cultural layers of influence, I perceived the Islamic “flavor” defining *gambus* genres and idioms over and above other spheres of influence in Kuala Lumpur. In many ways, the Malay label is an Islamic label, even in mostly secular music. *Gambus* musicians in KL felt as though they were expressing their Malayness and thus Muslimness by playing the *gambus*. When I asked one *gambus* student, Affiah, why she chose to study the *gambus*, she replied, “Because it is important for me as a Muslim” (*Sebab itu penting bagi saya sebagai orang Islam*) (personal communication, 22 November 2015). Furthermore, as the idea of what it means to be a Malay Muslim in Malaysia is a contested topic, so too is the topic of what kinds of music properly fall under the Malay label. This chapter reveals how the *gambus* functions to eclipse other spheres of influence in Malay musical genres by aligning Malay identity with a transnational Islamicate sphere of influence. In so doing, Malay Muslim identity is foregrounded not as an explicitly religious expression, but one indexed with religious cultural expression, thus naturalizing Malay Muslimness in identity performance through urban music transmission.



Figure 7: Screen capture from a random communication on the #GengTabligh Whatsapp chat group. 13 January 2016. Screen Capture by Joseph Kinzer.

Given the slippery nature of the Platonic category of Malay music, basing the discussion on genres that center on the *gambus* helps focus my analysis. In this chapter, I explore how genres are more than “purely technical categories, [but] touch on myths of class and nation” and other identity models (Baulch 2014:187; Wallach 2008; Weintraub 2010; Yampolsky 1989). The primary identity models in this chapter—and dissertation—revolve around concepts of race, religion, and transnationalism as they manifest in *gambus* transmission. My understanding of the Malay music complex is based on the extant English and Malay literature; audio and video recordings of Malay traditional music; ethnographic fieldwork with musicians and institutions in Kuala Lumpur and other locations throughout Malaysia such as Johor and Sabah.

### “What makes it Malay?”

When I asked my research participants in KL about the “Malay” components of *gambus* genres, most referred to the Islamic cultural components of the music. Despite this ubiquity, the exact articulation of this Islamic cultural expression was often opaque and abstract. When I asked what was “Malay” about the interrelated *gambus* idioms of Malay music, beyond the Islamicate reference, most pointed to the embellishment and ornamentation of the melody, which is referred to as *bunga* (lit. “flower”). When I asked Luk Ahmad, an ASWARA student in his 20s who has been playing Malay music since childhood, if *bunga* could be taught, he told me that it was possible to imitate the sounds, but ultimately relegated its authenticity to being Malay. He said, “[t]he feeling of *bunga* is like the heart of the ethnic[ity], other ethnic[itie]s may be playing it’s [sic] note but [this is] different from the player who is blood related to the ethnic[ity]... The *bunga* is like the Malays own feeling, the[ir] heritage” (ibid.). While this emphasis on Malayness was constant in all my interactions, the actual articulation of it through *gambus* music relied on abstract concepts and diverse global influences.

The general consensus in my observations of classes at ASWARA was that musical characteristics such as *bunga* were inexplicable. Luk said “[t]he *bunga* is the specific-with-feelings notes that can’t be describe[d] how to write it and how we need to feel it like pianissimo or forte, like that. No one can write the *bunga* down” (personal communication, 15 October 2017). When I asked another *gambus* student at the NCA, Ismail Alsaber, how he would describe *bunga*, he simply replied that he did not know how. I heard that one teacher at ASWARA tried to transcribe *bunga*, in a prescriptive sense, but I was never able to obtain an example of this.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> I was not able to obtain examples of these transcriptions because this teacher had somewhat of a rivalry with one of my teachers, and thus was not amenable to communication with me. I firmly believe this was due to my close association with this rival.

Besides this anomaly, I found that most informants with whom I discussed *bunga* concluded that it was inexplicable.

Embellishments that I noticed players using included trills, grace notes, slides, mordents, and countless other ways to highlight the melody. Most of the embellishments generally mimicked those of a vocalist, especially the melismatic characteristics of *bunga*. Yet even as I identified various embellishments to musicians, they insisted I was missing the point. When I asked Luk if it was possible to describe *bunga*, he said, “nobody can learn the *bunga* by music note but [instead by] hearing and feel [sic] it” (personal communication 15 October 2017). In essence, there is a holistic Malayness based on just the right combination of performative bytes that supervened on individual deconstruction and analysis, similar to the *gist/jazz* concept I introduce in Chapter 1. The concept of *bunga* was rarely discussed in my fieldwork unless I brought it up. Nonetheless, it was well known amongst Malay musicians, better defined through performance than linguistic description.

In listening to *gambus* players render melodies using *bunga*, I heard the use of *makam* (Malay spelling), the Arabic modal system ubiquitous in the Islamicate world.<sup>6</sup> Raja Zul told me that some students mimic the sounds of *makams*, but do not know which ones they are playing. Yet, these musical borrowings were sometimes intermixed with *bunga* in rendering Malay melodies, and often part of *taksims*, or solo melodic improvisations that comes before a piece. As an example, I draw from a staple in the Malay repertoire, “*Zapin Budi*,” which generally features the *gambus*, including a *taksim* at the beginning of the piece.

“*Zapin Budi*” is generally played in a minor key, but I heard some musicians playing quartertones, possibly mimicking *makam rast*. In the Western natural minor scale, for example,

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<sup>6</sup> I use the Malay spellings of *makam* and *taksim* throughout this dissertation when referring to these Arabic musical concepts.

the third and seventh scale degrees are flatted. In *makam rast*, the intervallic structure is similar, but the third and seventh scale degrees are not fully flatted—in addition to eliminating the flatted sixth scale degree—written in staff notation with half-flat nomenclature (see Figure 8). In the case of “*Zapin Budi*,” the commonly used key is G minor, and thus the intervallic structure is rendered with a B half-flat and F half-sharp when alluding to this *rast* structure. In Arabic *makams*, if *rast* is built on the tonic G it is called *makam yekah*, because unlike Western modes, when the tonic changes, the name of the *makam* can also change.<sup>7</sup> While many musicians did not know they were playing tetrachords—important building blocks of *makams*—within *makam rast* or *yekah*, they were aware of its Arabic connotation. The exact analysis is not crucial, because regardless of explicit knowledge of the music theory behind this influence, the use of Arabic modes, or a simple musical reference to them by means of imitation, became a strong performative transmission byte. This byte eclipsed many of the inexplicable qualities of *bunga* connected only to Malay identity and not readily indexed with another global sphere.

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<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that the names also depend on the modal system, for example, whether Arabic, Turkish, or otherwise. In the Turkish *rast makam*, the mode is typically built on the tonic D.



Figure 8: Natural minor scale, *makam rast*, and *makam yekah*, respectively.

While in KL, I attended solo *gambus* competitions where these Arab inflections were prominent and where all participants were Malay. Thanks to teachers such as the late Fadzil Ahmad and Raja Zulkarnain, KL *gambus* musicians became more sophisticated in their use of *makam* in their *taksims*. These musicians also began to refer to similar embellishments not as *bunga* but as *çarpma*, a Turkish term for nuance and ornamentation. For his master's thesis, Raja Zul analyzed *taksims* from recordings in Johor in the 1970s. He found that “zero” of them modulated between *makams* in their *taksims*, unless done so “accidentally” (personal communication, 10 November 2017). While listening to musicians perform in one competition at the National Museum, only those studying in KL, many with Raja Zul, modulated between *makams* in their *taksims* (28 November 2015). Musicians visiting from outside KL, such as the East Malaysian state of Sabah, used a single *makam* for the *taksim*. Ethnomusicologist Scott Marcus describes *maqamat* (Arabic, plural for *maqam*) as belonging to “families” in their

relationship to one another and how modulation occurs between them (1992:185). The KL musicians were more sensitive to these conventions in Arabic music, and many were well versed in Arab and a wider *oud* repertoire outside of Malaysia.

According to Raja Zul, few Malay songs include quartertones, aside from their use in *taksim* before the piece. This use of microtonality might sound strange to someone adept in Middle Eastern music, because the *taksim* is meant to set up the tonality for the coming piece. I sometimes heard *gambus* players mimicking the microtonal nuances of a *taksim* that they heard from famous artists in the Middle East, such as Munir Bashir, but then went on to perform a Malay tune that did not contain microtones. Raja Zul reminded me that it was more common in the era of Fadzil Ahmad for Malay melodies to feature microtonal elements (1970s-early 2000s) (personal communication, 10 November 2017). However, I noticed musicians inflecting these characteristics into melodies on occasion in Kuala Lumpur and less so outside KL. One thing I did discover was a marked increase in the frequency and prominence of Malay songs, especially those derived from the *zapin* dance genre, that feature *taksim* and *makams* in performances. I was also aware an increasing interest and performance of Arab and Turkish songs that feature the *oud*. Much of this increase was thanks to Raja Zul, an advocate for teaching this material to students. In 2003, he began teaching theory and conventions of *oud* performance outside Malaysia to students at ASWARA. I knew many students who sought him out independently as a known teacher in the area, one well versed in *makam* and Arabic and Turkish music. I soon became aware during my time in KL that he was not only encouraging this interest in *makams* and a Middle Eastern repertoire, but that his teaching was also meeting a demand for it.

In discussions of what makes Malay music Malay, in addition to *bunga*, the importance of lyrics was frequently referenced. Most of the lyrics were based in themes of romantic love, the

love of nature, or included stories of Malay heroes and other Malay tales. A full lyrical analysis is outside the scope of this dissertation, but because the Malay lyrics were so important by virtue of being Malay, I found it interesting to hear instances in the *gambus* repertoire where famous Arab melodies were set to Malay lyrics, or the Arabic lyrics were paired alongside the Malay lyrics in performance. One example of this is the song, *Bint El Shalabiya*, which is popular throughout the Islamic world. In the Malay version, the basic melody is kept identical, but the lyrics are rewritten in Malay. I noticed musicians beginning this piece in the Arabic and later switching to Malay after a verse and chorus or two. In the Arabic version, the lyrics contain a romantic love theme, while the Malay lyrics describe the natural world and its beauties. In Arabic, the song title means “Daughter of Shalabiyah,” while the Malay song is called “*Dunia Indah Sempurna*,” or “A World of Beauty and Perfection.” Emphasizing the beauty of nature was a frequent theme in setting Arab melodies to Malay lyrics.

In another example, “*Wahai Bunga Bunga*” (“Oh, the Flowers”), which is derived from the melody of the Arabic song, “*Ana W Enta*” (“You and Me”), the Arabic lyrics are replaced entirely with Malay. The story of “*Ana W Enta*” is one of lost love, while “*Wahai Bunga Bunga*” contains more references to nature. While “*Wahai Bunga Bunga*” does make reference to a broken heart—“The flowers fulfill a heart that is full of sorrow”—the story is not a translation of the Arabic. Blurring Arabic and Malay characteristics is not unique to music in Malaysia, and can be found in everything from architecture to fashion and more. In signage throughout Kuala Lumpur, I frequently saw the use of *jawi* script resurfacing in various places including restaurants and street signs (see Figure 9). This Arabic script was once used to write standard Malay, but was replaced by a Roman alphabet during the colonial era. The fact that the Arabic script signaled a traditional, historical Malay identity makes the blurring of Arabic and

Malay expression in the performing arts that much more powerful. I view this as one part of a symbolic ecology reinforcing the other.



Figure 9: Street sign in Kuala Lumpur with *jawi* script written above the Malay. Photo courtesy Sensintrovert Blog. Accessed 10 November 2017 <<http://howsy.blogspot.com/2008/02/kl-jawi-road-signs-part-of-islam.html>>.

In the case of the aforementioned songs, the lyrics themselves are performative transmission bytes (as is the *jawi* script in signage). Given that my collaborators emphasized lyrics as an important marker of Malay identity, the Arab melodic byte merges Malay and Arab-Islamic identity. Furthermore, the Arabic lyrics paired alongside the Malay lyrics further show how Malay identity is aligned with the Islamicate world. The two most common Malay components, aside from a direct reference to Islam, were *bunga* and Malay lyrics. Each of these components was consistently overshadowed by the Islamicate influence in my observations of *gambus* music transmission in KL.

A final aesthetic component that I found frequently referenced among Malay artists and teachers, including music, theatre, and dance, was the idea that Malay arts are “gentle” (*lemah lembut*). This aesthetic ideal is similar to the Javanese concept of “refinement” (*halus*) in artistic practices. During my time at ASWARA, I was able to meet many dance students and observe their classes. Especially during a *zapin* dance, which is arguably the most iconic Malay dance

genre, dancers referenced the *lemah lembut* essence of the form. The idea of this aesthetic is to execute every feature of the dance with a smooth grace, avoiding abrupt and “harsh” (*keras*) movements, and in the case of music, harsh sounds. Other adjectives frequently used to describe the Malay aesthetic included “shy” (*pemalu*), “polite, or courteous” (*ramah-tamah*), or even sometimes “sorrowful, or sad” (*sedih*).

Some Malay artists eschewed these ideas tied to the traditional *adat Melayu* camp. These artists might better fit within the “new Malay” part of the identity spectrum. As Luk said, “[i]n Malaysian music scene, all you got is a bunch of sad songs over and over since 30 [or more] years ago” (personal communication, 25 January 2017). Reflecting a similar sentiment in a recent interaction, he said, “[b]ananas can be helpful in overcoming depression due to high levels of tryptophan, which the body converts to serotonin, the mood-elevating brain neurotransmitter. Malay music need [sic] more banana” (personal communication, 21 February 2017). Part of this “improvement” of Malay music, in Luk’s case, included performing new and relevant songs for *gambus*, including Middle Eastern music and genres such as rock and *pop moden* (Malaysian pop). He says, “[a]s a musician, we always want to do something different, to compete. There is a lot of band [sic] in KL that play fusion jazz, slow jazz and almost anything jazz—other than that it is just a traditional band that play [sic] the same classics music. I have a passion that I want to contribute something that make [sic] the scene more unique, valuable to anyone, outside or local people” (personal communication, 25 January 2017). This interaction reflects a sentiment I heard echoed in many interactions I had with students at ASWARA, UM, UiTM, and UPSI. The idea was to reframe Malay arts as part of a cosmopolitan global sphere, and to provide a fresh twist on tradition that was relevant to contemporary youth culture that differentiates it from the past. As one student, Tadik, put it, “There is no Malay music, but only

Malays making music” (personal communication 21 February 2015). Nonetheless, most of these musicians with whom I worked still expressed the idea that their Malaysia heritage was directly tied to their music.

As I began to study the *gambus* and its relationship with Malay-identified genres, I learned that “Malay music” is defined by its adaptability and syncretism, and most of all by its renewed practice in the present. Raja Zul told me, “If you want to learn to play like a Malay, you must eat like a Malay” as he pointed to the *sambal* (chili paste) sitting on our table (personal communication 4 March 2015). Yet even *sambal*, the iconic condiment of Malay identity, traces its history to the 16<sup>th</sup> century when the Portuguese brought chili peppers to Malacca from South America (Lauden 1996:141). While Zul laughed when he made the *sambal* comment, a similar sentiment was reflected in my other informants’ views of learning Malay music. In other words, to learn the music, one must either be Malay or emulate Malayness. Pak Norihan, for example, repeatedly said that in order to play a melody properly, it was important to learn to sing it first by emulating a Malay singer. According to him, it was insufficient to simply learn the lyrics and memorize the main melody, insisting on emulating vocalists in order to eventually transfer this absorbed knowledge to the instrument. However, when analyzed, unpacking Malay components of Malay expression is syncretic at its core, defined by its adaptability and localization of global spheres of influence.

### **Gambus in the Malay World**

The *gambus* is a strong Malay identity marker throughout the Malay-speaking world, primarily in Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, and Brunei. Ethnomusicologists Birgit Berg (2011) and Charles Capwell (1995 & 2011) discuss the Arab aesthetics in the Indonesian ensemble and idiom known as *orkes gambus*. In Malaysia, I found little evidence of this primarily Arab-

Indonesian idiom. I did encounter a complicated web of overlapping genres and idioms that contain the *gambus*, including *zapin*, *asli*, *ghazal Melayu*, and *kumpulan gambus* among many others forming what I call a Malay music complex. These musical practices are influenced by the historical trade between Indian Ocean societies, especially India and the Hadhramaut on the Arabian Peninsula.

Historically, the Hadhrami *gambus* is smaller than the Arabian *oud*, in addition to some important differences, such as a goat or lizard skin covered soundboard. These Hadhrami style lutes are still manufactured in Malaysia, but mostly in Sabah. The locally made “*gambus*” in the Peninsula are modeled after the Middle Eastern style. Nonetheless, many KL musicians chose to play imported Turkish or Egyptian *ouds*. Due to this demand, while lute makers in Peninsular Malaysia began designing lutes based on the Middle Eastern models as early as the 1950s, they became increasingly expensive and marketed to KL musicians during my fieldwork. In Malaysia, all of these instruments are referred to as either “*gambus*” or “*oud*,” and the terms are conflated and interchangeable. Conflating the two and switching back and forth between names blurs the two identity models together, thus transmitting Malay identity as bound up with this transnational Islamicate identity framework.

The name *gambus* comes from the *Hadhrami* lute of the same name, or what is sometimes referred to as the *turbi* in wider Yemen, depending on the region (Schuyler 1990:60). Musicians in rural areas of Johor and Sabah still perform the *gambus* that closely resembles the Yemeni *qanbus* or *turbi*, which in Malaysia is sometimes called *gambus Melayu* (Hilarian 2005:66). These names are confusing because the type of lute that most closely resembles the “classical Arabian *oud*” is sometimes called *gambus Arab*, *gambus Hadhramaut*, or simply “*oud*” (ibid.) Organologist Curt Sachs (among others) suggests the name “*gambus*” is of Turkish

origin, “variously spelled as *gambus*, *kabosa*, or *qūpūz*” (2012:252). Hilarian notes that these instruments are only referred to with modifiers such as *Hadhramaut* and *Melayu* if there is something specific being referenced in a discussion about the instruments (2005:66).

Ethnomusicologist Anis Nor cites the 15th century as the approximate date of the arrival of the *gambus* in the Malay world alongside a period of significant Islamization of the coastal Malays (1993). Hilarian argues that due to earlier trade relationships between the Malay and Arab world that the *gambus* could have arrived in the Malay world as early as the 8<sup>th</sup> or 9th centuries, but there is no definitive evidence to support this (2005:68). Most *gambus* musicians I met attributed the *gambus*’ arrival in the Malay world to the Arabian connection. In Malaysia, anything Arab tends to bear significant symbolic capital as a signifier of a transnational Islamic identity, from fashion to architecture to the performing arts.

In addition to its sound and wider production and availability beyond locally made instruments, my hypothesis for explaining why the Middle Eastern *oud* has all but replaced the Hadhrami style *gambus* centers on its design and stronger connections with the Islamicate sphere of influence. The Malay/Hadhrami styles of *gambus* range in features that include animal and floral decorative motifs, and a more pear-shaped body than the Arabian *oud* (Hilarian 2005:73). The other styles of *oud*, however, carry more potent associations of Muslim cultural identity. Despite the fact that most Arab musical genres featuring the *oud*, as is the case with the Malay *gambus* repertoire, are secular ones, in Muslim Southeast Asia, anything Middle Eastern tends to carry significant cultural capital as a symbol of Islamic culture. This symbolism is reflected in architecture, fashion, language use, and more. Furthermore, if Malay culture can trace its musical roots to the Islamicate world, this brings significant clout to the Malay Muslim identity as it is mapped to Arab Muslim identity. The link between Arab symbols and Islam is a powerful part of

the Malaysian popular imagination. This link is found in other parts of Malaysia's aesthetic landscape, such as in architecture, fashion, and language choice. Examining traditional music provides further insight into these conceptions of transnationalism, postcolonial identity constructions, and competing streams of modernity.

As I explain in the previous chapter, material symbols such as the *gambus* can act as points of value articulation as overlapping performative transmission bytes. These bytes store and communicate the values that part of a wider symbolic ecology. Malaysia is filled with performative bytes that transmit value placed on all things modern, especially with regard to technological development. With its minimal use of modern technology and its appeal to the "traditional," the *gambus* carves a space within this saturated urban environment by articulating within a sphere of values also dominant in Malaysia, a religiously laden, Islamic sphere of cultural influence. This sphere of influence is presented as forming an integral part of Malay identity as indigenous identity in Malaysia.

### **Gambus Construction**

In the Malaysian Peninsular state of Johor, where the *gambus* is most famous, there is a distinction between *gambus Melayu* and *gambus Johor*. The *gambus Johor* resembles the pear-shaped *oud* styles found throughout the Middle East and feature wooden soundboards with intricately carved geometric rosette patterns for sound holes. The *gambus Melayu* on the other hand resembles the smaller teardrop-shaped Yemeni lute, and in Malaysia is also called *gambus Hijaz*, named for the historical region in the Arabian Peninsula; *gambus sampan*, meaning "boat lute" and resembles the shape of a boat; or *gambus biawak*, named for its use of *biawak* (monitor lizard) skin to cover the resonator (Nizam 2013:16). Music scholar and *gambus* musician, Nizam Attan, describes the sound of this type of *gambus* as "*kasar*" ("harsh") and "*kurang merdu*"

(“not very melodious”) (ibid.). I found that many players preferred the sound of the Middle Eastern *ouds* because they are more “gentle” (*lemah lembut*), an aesthetic ideal often cited in Malay arts.

Another *gambus* musician, Azrin Abdullah, says the *gambus Melayu* is good for *ghazal* because the strings have higher action and thus the rhythmic strumming works better than the softer melody-oriented Arabian *ouds* (personal communication, 11 December 2015). The *gambus* Johor resembles the Arabian *oud*, and according to Hilarian is also referred to as *gambus Hadhramaut* (2005:66). I found that most players in KL used the Arabian style *oud*, which is called *gambus* Johor if manufactured in Johor. The only time I found musicians in Peninsular Malaysia playing the smaller version was in old video footage provided to me by Pak Norihan. In the East Malaysian state of Sabah on the island of Borneo, this type of *gambus* (*sampan/Melayu/biawak*) is still commonly played and manufactured amongst Bruneian Malays living in the region.

The most common types of wood used in *gambus* construction that I found in the Peninsula were *durian belanda* (soursop), *nangka* (jackfruit), bamboo, *papan lapis* (plywood), and *kayu jati* (teakwood), although other types were also used (see Nizam 2013:15). One *gambus* maker, known as “Dollah *Gambus*” said these types of wood are “good for body and back, but not soundboard” (personal communication, 5 September 2017). According to him, spruce is best for the soundboard but hard to obtain. As an alternative, he used a similar wood known as *kayu damar minyak* (Borneo kauri wood) (ibid.). According to *gambus* maker, Hashim Rosyym, the most common wood types used in *gambus* construction in Sabah were *kayu nangka* (jackfruit), *kayu pulai lilin* (candlewood), *kayu tengkawang* (Borneo tallow nut), *kayu nyirih* (Areca palm wood), *kayu akasia* (Acacia wood), and *kayu cempedak* (breafruit wood) (personal

communication, 5 August 2017). The types of soundboard I noted in East and West Malaysia included wooden ones with rosette sound holes in addition to the use of both *biawak* lizard skin and goatskin to cover the soundboard.

In terms of local *gambus* construction, I found that the Hadhrami style is more popular in East Malaysian Borneo, specifically in the Bongawan district of the state of Sabah. These types are usually carved out of a single piece of resinous wood, while the larger *ouds* are made out of multiple pieces of wood, including strips of wood that form the body. This latter technique is popular in lute making throughout the Islamic world and those found in Peninsular Malaysia.

On the Peninsula, I rarely encountered anyone playing anything other than what Hilarian describes as the “Arabian *oud*” (2005:66). In Hilarian’s extensive overview of *gambus* in Malaysia, he provides a figure of the wide variety of styles encountered in Malaysia (2005:68) (see Figure 10). I was able to document all of these styles, but only by including those I encountered in museum exhibits devoted to the *gambus* as well as in historical photographs. In addition to the instruments featured in Hilarian’s example (see Figure 10), I found another style of peg box attached to the *gambus Melayu/sampan* in Sabah, which contains various bird carvings. These can be found played throughout Sabah in East Malaysian Borneo (see Figure 11).

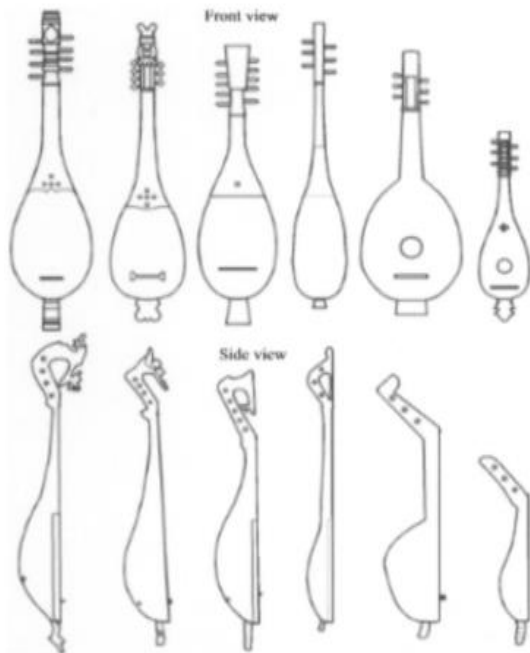


Figure 10: Hilarian's illustration of *gambus* types found in the Malay world (2005:68).



Figure 11: Bird carvings on *gambus* peg boxes found in Bongawan, Sabah. 11 August 2017. Photo by Joseph Kinzer.

The historical practice of *gambus* construction in Malaysia is unclear. Pak Norihan assured me that people were building *gambus* in the region “from early times,” but none of my informants could point to any specific historical figures responsible for building *gambus* in the region prior to the mid-20th century (personal communication, 14 May 2015). During the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, it was common for Malaysian *gambus* to play imported *ouds*, including Malaysia’s most famous player, Fadzil Ahmad, who was known for performing on his Iraqi *oud*, among other varieties such as the Turkish or Egyptian *oud* varieties (personal communication with Raja Zulkarnain, 9 April 2017).

Contemporary *gambus* construction on the Peninsula is based primarily in Batu Pahat District, Johor, thanks to the efforts of the late *gambus* maker, Hassan Othman (1925-2013) who was active in Malaysia since 1963, and officially opened a workshop in 1969 (Zazaly 2006). He learned the craft from his father, Othman Ahmad (d. 1978), a carpenter by trade, and the noted maker Sheikh Ahmad Al-Kadri (d. unknown) in Singapore in 1950 (ibid.). Cultural scholar Nik Mustapha Bin Nik Mohd. Salleh presented a paper on *gambus* at the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) meeting in Tokyo in 1997, which preceded the recognition of Hassan’s work by the organization (Zazali 2011). I was fortunate to meet Hassan’s nephew, Halidan bin Ithnin (b. 1966) who continued the tradition that he learned from his late uncle. Other *gambus* makers still practicing the craft in Kampung Rahmat, a village in Batu Pahat District, Johor, included Mohd. Diah Bin Ariffin (b. 1945), who has been active since 1999, and his son Mohd Aidil bin Mohd Diah (b. unknown).

In Kuala Lumpur, I met several musicians who were part of a younger generation trying their hand at *gambus* construction, including Abdullah Mohd Redza (or “Dollah *Gambus*”) (b. 1985) and Ahmed Fahmy (or “Mie *Gambus*”) (b. 1987). Interestingly, in Kuala Lumpur I met a

guitar luthier named Jeffrey Yong (b. 1957) who built what he called the “*gambustar*,” a fusion of the guitar and *gambus*. He designed the *gambustar* for the late guitarist, Farid Ali (1963-2013). Most of his lute making revolved around guitar construction.

Renowned makers of the Hadhrami-style *gambus* from Bongawan, Sabah include Pak Awang Besar (b. 1948), a self-taught master who began constructing *gambus* in the 1990s. He continued to make *gambus* with his son Hashim Rosyim (b. 1983) when I visited on multiple occasions in 2015 and 2016. Another famous maker was Sulaiman Jabidin, or “Pak Malau,” (1941-2016), whom I met briefly before he passed away during my fieldwork. Another maker, Tajul Munchi (b. 1941) was active making *gambus* during my time in Sabah, but I was unable to meet him. He began constructing mostly in the *gambus seludang* (boat lute) style in 1957. In a newspaper article, Tajul is quoted as saying he hope to pass his knowledge on to his son (name not mentioned), but thus far his son is only interested in playing *gambus* (Lajun 2016). Those mentioned here were the makers with the most impact in Malaysia during my time studying in 2015-2016.

### **Gambus Tuning**

While studying *gambus* in Malaysia, I encountered four main tuning methods used among the players I knew. Most *gambus* players used five courses of two strings, which were tuned to the same pitch, in addition to a single bass string. The first most popular tuning was borrowed from the standard Arab tuning arrangement, from low to high: C, F, A, D, G, C. A second related tuning arrangement was similar to the Arab model, from low to high: C, E, A, D, G, C. A third tuning system followed the circle of fifths, from low to high: B, E, A, D, G, C or B, E, A, D, G, B. These were the tunings found most frequently in classes at ASWARA and in my lessons with the previously mentioned players. The final tuning system I encountered was

described to me as the “original authentic *ghazal* tuning,” by a professional *gambus* musician and locally recognized expert on *ghazal*, Rojer Rozaidy Shukry. He tuned the *gambus* a key below the more ubiquitous perfect fifth arrangement, from low to high: A, D, G, C, F, Bb (personal communication, 24 July 2017). When I asked where he learned to tune this way, he said he learned it from growing up around *ghazal* music in Johor Bahru, the capital city of Johor. Several other musicians told me that tunings have varied throughout the history of *gambus* playing in Malaysia and that there is no standard. As a result of Fadzil Ahmad’s influence and the general influence of Middle Eastern music theory promoted by teachers in the 21st century, such as Raja Zulkarnain, Arab and Turkish tuning systems began to predominate amongst the players I encountered in Kuala Lumpur and throughout the Peninsula, especially after 2003 when Raja Zul trained as the predecessor to Fadzil Ahmad at ASWARA.

### **Musical Function of the Gambus**

There are several primary musical functions of the *gambus* that I studied. The first is the use of the *gambus* as a solo instrument, either in competition or in *taksim* (Malay spelling of the Arabic *taqsim*), or solo melodic improvisation at the beginning of a musical piece. I also noticed the occasional *gambus* performance as an accompaniment to religious song and/or recited poetry, but this was less common. For example, at weddings or cultural events hosted by the National Museum, musicians were sometimes invited to sing a religious song or two in the spur of the moment. This small component to the larger function was not usually a planned part of the event. More commonly, I witnessed the *gambus* performed as a melodic instrument in several ensemble varieties. Finally, I noticed the use of the *gambus* as a rhythmic instrument while also playing countermelodies.

The use of the *gambus* as a rhythmic and counter-melodic instrument is interesting given that it is well known as a melodic instrument throughout the Middle East and North Africa where it originates. Strong and heavily accented picking techniques that involve tremolo and the use of drone pitches are a common feature in Middle Eastern *oud* playing. In certain Malay ensembles, such as *ghazal*, these techniques were used frequently to highlight the underlying rhythmic pattern of the piece. In fact, most early recordings of *ghazal* that I could find, such as those by the Johorian *ghazal* group, *Sri Pelangi*, utilized the *gambus* in this manner, with its melodic function restricted to an equitable counter-melodic role alongside other instruments such as the *biola* (violin) or *harmonium*.

The *gambus* performances I attended in KL almost always featured the *gambus* player in a central, solo role, similar to the function of the *oud* in Middle Eastern music. Historically in Malay genres, similar to those found throughout Southeast Asia, such as the *gamelan* in Java and beyond, the instrumental roles were more or less equal, none outshining the other. While the *gambus* maintained a counter-melodic role in Malay ensembles as well as a solo melodic role in those I encountered in KL, I also noticed that the *gambus* was typically featured physically and spatially in front of the group.

Another interesting observation was that historically, *gambus* players rarely sang, but in my research it was not uncommon to find a *gambus* player featured as the bandleader and singer, comparable to the guitarist-singer or singer-songwriter in many rock bands. This phenomenon reflects the competing values of the West and Islamicate spheres of influence in *gambus* music. I argue that while the Western, global sphere of influence was pervasive in Malaysian urban centers, the Islamicate sphere was foregrounded in *gambus* music transmission as a model of Malay creative expression that was not explicitly religious, yet palpably Malay and Muslim,

complementing the urban secular consumerist lifestyles of urban Malaysian society. This theme is something I discuss in greater detail in the next chapter. In what follows, I outline genres and idioms that contain the *gambus*, briefly discussing each for reference and how they privilege the Islamicate sphere over other spheres of influence.

### **Genres and Idioms in the Gambus Musical Repertoire**

There are many genres and forms that fall under the rubric of *muzik Melayu*, *muzik tradisional*, or *muzik asli Melayu*, or simple *Melayu*. These various terms frequently overlap and intertwine to form a music complex that signifies Malay identity in some way. For example, the term *asli*, or “original,” denotes a hybrid genre that incorporates elements from various syncretic Malay traditions, but it can also refer to the complex as a whole, denoting its “traditional” and/or “indigenous” status. That said there are many variations of artistic expression performed throughout Malaysia by members of the several hundred, non-Malay *orang asli* (indigenous) groups that can make this label confusing. *Orang asli* are the indigenous minority population whose ancestors inhabited Peninsular Malaysia before the advent of the Malay kingdoms. However, they are often excluded from the popular conception of *bumiputera* (“sons of the soil”) in Malaysia, the label often used to privilege Malay identity as indigenous identity in Malaysia (Tan Sooi Beng 2014:355). *Asli* as a genre name is unique in that it signals indigenous identity, while other Malay musical idioms are named after a base component upon which the idiom or genre is built, such as a specific rhythmic pattern, e.g., *masri*; dance, e.g., *zapin*; or core instrument, e.g., *kumpulan gambus*.

In my observations, it was common for the necessary and sufficient conditions of each Malay genre to change based on the person describing it or on the particular performance context. To make matters more opaque, included in this category were overlapping expressive

forms of theatre, dance, music, poetry, and martial arts (*silat*). Since the advent of the Malay kingdoms from the 8<sup>th</sup> century onward, gong and drum ensembles were found in royal court and village performances where ritual and theatre frequently intermixed. By the time of Malaysian Independence, these traditions were already on the decline and remain relatively obscure in Malaysia today (Lockard 1998:211). Most of these types of performances today exist in the state of Kelantan, where I was fortunate to attend a performance of a Malay-style shadow puppet theatre known as *wayang kulit Kelantan* in the rural Tumpat District on the East Coast of Kelantan. Since the 1980s and 90s, the dominant political party in Kelantan, the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), has restricted and at times completely banned this type of performance for Malays due to its association with pre-Islamic times and Hindu-Buddhist ritual components (Tan and Matusky 2004:35).

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, theatrical and musical groups traveling throughout the Malay archipelago that were considered “*Melayu*,” performed a diverse repertoire of Malay, Chinese, Indian, Middle Eastern, and European influences (Weintraub 2010:37). These groups were predecessors to *orkes Melayu* groups that gained popularity on the radio in the 1930s, later evolving into the popular form, *dangdut*, which enjoyed its major popularity in Indonesia. Groups under the labels of various types of theatre troupe, including *komedi stambul*, *bangsawan*, and *opera* gained popularity throughout the Malay-speaking world during this era (36). Names such as *orkes harmonium*, *orkes Melayu*, and *orkes gambus* were particularly popular on the radio in this era (38). During this time, *orkes Melayu* was a name applied to variously related ensembles with a variety of repertoire, usually comprising a *pantun* (quatrain) verse structure with Malay lyrics, arranged with simple melodies, and in verse-chorus form. These bands were popular throughout the Malay world in the early 20th century, including

British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies (40). According to my research participants, the ensembles labeled “*orkes*” remained active mostly in Indonesia and were not usually present in Malaysian traditional ensembles considered part of Malay music in Malaysia.

However, I was aware of the name *orkes* (“orchestra”) applied to some ensembles as a generic moniker, though not necessarily indicating anything specifically related to the *orkes gambus* genres found in Indonesia, and perhaps intended as an homage to the past *orkes* groups of the early 20th century. I recall attending a *Hari Raya Aidilfitri* (end of Ramadan) celebration where the band called themselves *Orkes Melayu*. Yet on a different evening, I attended an event where a band performed the same repertoire with the same instrumentation, combining *ghazal*, *asli*, *zapin*, and other genres, that performed at other celebrations of this kind with no mention of the name “*orkes*.”

I was also aware of the presence of what are labeled *orkes gambus* groups performing as invited guests at gatherings such as *Hari Raya* celebrations. These groups usually hailed from Sumatra, and often did not include a *gambus* in the ensemble, instead inviting a Malaysian *gambus* player to join in the performance as a guest. The interesting distinction I noticed in these groups was that the lyrical content of the songs was often Islamically themed whereas the Malay music I examined was largely secular. Yet, the latter secular repertoire was nevertheless a medium through which religious identity was performed.

In a speech delivered at the 1971 National Cultural Congress at Universiti Malaya, famed Malay pop icon, P. Ramlee, encouraged Malaysian artists to maintain the “soul” (*jiwa*) of new popular music by infusing new and diverse forms of popular music with traditional musical characteristics (Nasir 2012:13; Ramlee 2003 [1971]). Identifying and finding this “soul” is not simple, necessarily reflecting socio-cultural hierarchical value systems. I found that Malaysian

musicians strove to enact cultural knowledge through performative bytes of cultural identity information in order to navigate the complexities of performing identity through music. In the case of my fieldwork, a particularly potent object for storing this cultural information was the *gambus*.

According to Nizam Attan, a locally recognized expert on *gambus* as a well as a research participant and acquaintance of mine in Malaysia, described the primary functions of *gambus* in traditional music in Malaysia as a solo instrument and accompanying the *ghazal*, *zapin*, *nasyid*, *kumpulan gambus*, and *samrah* genres (2013:12). I encountered all of these genres, which frequently overlapped, paired alongside the *gambus* except for *nasyid*, which I found typically featured a *capella*, with exclusively Western instrumentation, or with a combination of frame percussion and Western instrumentation. However, it is common in Indonesia for *orkes gambus* groups to perform *nasyid* or *sholawat* (praise for the Prophet) songs that feature *gambus*. I found that this practice was not common in Malaysia unless the musicians were guests from Indonesia. As was the case with many *gambus* idioms, the role of the *gambus* was increasingly foregrounded in urban performances I attended.

#### *Samrah, Joget, and Bangsawan*

On several occasions I was invited to events that were intended to celebrate *Hari Raya*. It is interesting that in Malaysia, the end of the holy month of Ramadan is celebrated well into the following month of Shawwal, and sometimes even beyond that. This practice is not as common in the Arabic-speaking Islamic world. These performances were often labeled *samrah*, though when similar performances occurred for other social events, the party was simply labeled, *kenduri*, or “feast,” and the music was referred to in variously nonstandard ways, such as “*gambus* music,” or “*kenduri* music,” “Oriental music,” or simply “*lagu-lagu Melayu*.”

According to a colleague, ethnomusicologist and *oud* musician, Aboud (Albert) Agha, the name “*samrah*” could possibly be related to another genre with which he is familiar, *sahra*, which describes a musical gathering intended for celebration (personal communication, 8 August 2016). Based on my research, this name is more commonly applied in Indonesia, but has made its way into Malaysian contexts as well, although not as common as the other practical terms, such as “Oriental music” and the like. According to Pak Norihan, the dance genre known as *joget*, which traces its roots to the Malay courts, but was popularized as a social dance in the 1930s, evolved from *samrah* (personal communication, 14 May 2015).

In his rather bombastic *Malay Sketches* of 1895, British colonial administrator Frank Swettenham notes the existence of *joget* performances on display in the royal courts of Pahang, describing the performance as combining “[rude] orchestral instruments” and dance. He suggests that the *joget* and its instrumental accompaniment (probably referring to gong and drums) came from Java and North Sumatra (45). The scene captured by this description would probably be best described as *joget gamelan*, but later in Malaysian history the term “*joget*” came to refer generally to “dance music” of multiple varieties (Tan and Matusky 2004:7).

The 1930s was an important era for introducing this type of dance music, known as *pentas joget*, referring to a public dance hall, along with *bangsawan* (Malay opera). *Bangsawan* theatre is characteristic of Malay performing arts because of its syncretism, including influences from all spheres mentioned in this chapter in addition to a Chinese influence as well, including a local Chinese Malaysian component. The public dance hall setting was the platform that cast many of the genres that became associated with Malay identity into the popular imagination. *Gambus* was commonly featured in *bangsawan* plays that were Middle Eastern in theme or origin, as the *gambus* was a strong symbol of the Middle East/Islamic world (Tan 1993:153).

Thus, the *gambus* as a marker of Islamicate identity is not new, but I perceived an increased emphasis on this sphere of influence in the urban transmission of *gambus* in which I participated. Especially associated with Malay identity was the *zapin* genre. In *bangsawan* theatre, when *zapin* was performed, the *gambus* was so closely associated with the genre that the dance songs of this variety were often simply referred to as *gambus*, describing the rhythmic pattern and dance genre more than simply the musical instrument (Tan 1993:153). This application of genre label was practical in nature and pragmatically applied in a less-than-systematic way.

### *Zapin*

This music and dance genre is perhaps the most famous genre associated with Malay performing arts. As dance ethnologist Anis Nor illustrates, this genre comprises two major forms, the *zapin Melayu* and *zapin Arab*, the *zapin Melayu* adapted from performances by Hadhramis living on the Peninsula, especially those immigrating in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (1993:viii). Several Arabic words could provide clues to its derivation, including *zaffa*, which means “to lead the bride to her groom in a wedding procession,” *zafah*, which means “wedding,” or *zafana*, which means “to dance at a wedding” (ibid.). *Zapin* in Malaysia is closely associated with social functions, including but not limited to weddings.

The contemporary form of *zapin* were found mostly in Johor and the wider geographic areas stemming from the Johor and Riau Malay sultanates during the 18th and 19th centuries (ibid.). The contemporary *zapin* was formed from the significant influence of the Malay film industry from the late 1940s, which itself was influenced greatly by Western and Latin dances, both of which I include in the Western sphere of influence. In the 1960s, dances such as the samba, cha-cha-cha, and mambo became important aesthetic drivers in the formation of contemporary *zapin*, mirroring similar trends in the United States, though with different fusions

(*ibid.*). However, the most symbolically potent and historical origins of the *zapin* reside in its Arab origins, and thus connected to the Islamicate sphere of influence.

All forms of *zapin* in Malaysia trace their roots to *zapin Arab*, the dance form brought by Hadhrami Arabs to Malaysia, especially prevalent after the 19th century (Anis 1993:5). It is suggested that the main difference between the *zapin Arab* and *zapin Melayu* forms lies in the adaptations made by the Malays that included more controlled and refined dance movements than the Arab traditions, which entailed “bigger stepping motions, higher skips and jumps, wider arm sways, and more exaggerated stooping and bending of the upper torso” (7-8). This distinction reflects the aforementioned *lemah lembut* (gentle) Malay aesthetic versus the more “harsh” (*keras*) movements of non-Malay genres.<sup>8</sup>

The most iconic instrumentation associated with *zapin* was that which could be traced to the Arab influence, including the *marawis* (hand drums), *dok* (long drum), and *gambus* (9). The *gambus* was an especially important part of defining the genre early on. In fact, many early *zapin* groups were known as *kumpulan tari gambus*, or “*gambus* dance groups” (Anis 1993:26). By the late 19th century, these groups became important parts of special religious events hosted by Malay royalty (*ibid.*). Furthermore, there are many well-known *zapin* tunes that are named after the *gambus*, such as “*Gambus Jodoh*,” and several famous *zapin* groups that contain “*gambus*” in the title, such as “*Gambus Jamratul ‘Uz*” (26-7).

Anis describes certain elements of *zapin* that have remained consistent throughout the history of *zapin* performance. He notes “the predominance of the *gambus* or ‘*ud* as the leading

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<sup>8</sup> *Lemah lembut* was described to me as an aesthetic ideal that included not only artistic performance characteristics but also the way in which a person carried themselves in any social setting, i.e., with patience, refinement, and avoiding behavior such as crude language (general understanding based on observations during my fieldwork, 2015-16).

instrument, the use of the *marwas* hand drums and their interlocking drumming patterns, the improvised free-metred prelude dominated by the solo *gambus* player, the coda (peculiar to the *zapin* tradition), the four-beat basic dance phrase, and the absence of leg movements at the first dance count of the basic dance phrase” (1993:19). I heard *zapin* tunes played in staged, classroom, and wedding events. The only context in which I witnessed all of these characteristics was when the focus was a staged event of *zapin*-only music and dance. At weddings, I often found that the *marawis* were missing, or perhaps there was no dance to accompany the piece. The primary way in which I encountered *zapin* in Malaysia was through its presence amongst a wider Malay music complex as I describe above. When *zapin* pieces were performed, there were two elements mentioned above that always stood out, the *gambus* and the free-metered *taksim* to introduce the piece.

During Malay traditional music performances, I observe heard the *taksim* played before *zapin* pieces or pieces of Arab origin. This observation revealed to me that of all the various dance, theatre, and music genres combined under the Malay music complex, *zapin* was one of the most associated with an Islamic cultural heritage. To this point, Anis acknowledges that at some point *zapin* was transmitted only amongst Malays, he notes that historically, “[i]t is of interest that the *zapin* tradition can be found only among the Muslim Malays who have had historical contacts with the Arabs and Arab culture” (1993:19). In my fieldwork, I noticed a repeated indexing of the cultural influences from the Arabic-speaking world with Malay Islamic culture.

Again, citing Anis’ 1993 book on *zapin*, he notes that “there are no public or private institutions for the study of indigenous performance traditions” such as *zapin*. Yet it was around this time in the early 1990s, when the *Akademi Seni Kebangsaan* (ASWARA) was established in

order to provide full time programs for Malaysian and wider arts scholarship (Gonzales 2008:289). During my fieldwork in 2015-16, I discovered that thanks to the efforts of dance teachers such as Anis Nor, Joseph Gonzales, Marion D’Cruz, and Mohd. Seth Hamzah, among others, ASWARA became a vibrant setting where traditional dances such as *zapin* were studied and performed alongside Western forms such as ballet. Today, most performances of *zapin* are presentational in nature, highly choreographed, and rarely include those that are participatory and unrehearsed as they were in the past (Anis 1993:52). This phenomenon suggests a dying art form. However, as I saw at several weddings that I attended in both Johor and in Kuala Lumpur, a few courageous individuals who remember the old days when it was a ubiquitous and primarily social dance, spontaneously danced without choreography. Those who danced an unrehearsed version of *zapin* at the events I attended usually included individuals from the older generations (*orang tua*).

#### *Asli and Dondang Sayang*

In his discussion of *muzik Melayu asli*, Associate Professor of Music at Universiti Malaya, Mohd. Nasir Hashim, describes the “Malay identity” characteristics of *asli* performance: “The somewhat melancholic melody utilises a lot of ornamentation in each song; the placement of harmony (chord progression) as well as the organised use of melodic and harmonic minor is also an important feature. All these portray a strong Malay identity” (2012:2). While he does not explain why these characteristics denote Malay identity, I found similar ideas expressed while observing *asli* classes and performances. The idea that *asli* songs are “melancholic” is due to their generally slow tempo. The use of minor modes extends to other genres, including *ghazal* and *zapin*, due to the influence of popular Arab *makams* such as *makam nahawand* and *makam*

*hijaz*. To many musicians in Malaysia, these elements denote a Malay sound that is tied to its Islamic history.

*Asli* can also denote a specific genre based on an eight-beat rhythmic pattern (see Figure 12). *Dondang sayang* is an improvised song genre that developed from *asli*. The difference between the two mainly lies in the improvised components (Chopyak 1986:114). As is the case with *asli*, the rhythmic pattern consists of eight beat phrases. The lyrical content of *dondang sayang* is generally love and romance themed. When I encountered *dondang sayang* tunes, they were mixed into a larger repertoire or performance program.

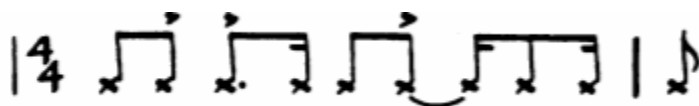


Figure 12: *Asli* rhythmic pattern. (Chopyak 1986:114).

*“Oriental Music,” Muzik Padang Pasir, and Sharqi*

As I explain at the beginning of this chapter, I quickly learned that the linguistic articulation of *Melayu* music is far less important than the actual performances. This observation explains why there are so many labels and definitions that conflict with one another when I asked people to describe the music. At the same time, linguistic articulations of genre can be important due to the sheer diversity of mixed repertoire that falls under blanket identity categories such as *Melayu*. For example, my *gambus* teacher, Raja Zulkarnain, was a strong advocate for promoting Middle Eastern and North African musical traditions through *gambus* performance. While he was an adept musician capable of performing in myriad varieties of Malay musical traditions, and often does so as a professional musician, he told me repeatedly that he prefers what is often referred to as “Oriental music,” or music from the Middle East and North Africa. When I asked him to clarify why he preferred this music, he said, “[b]asically the local Malay music is not so interesting compared to *makam* and Arab and Turkish music.” (personal communication, 23

April 2015). Many pieces borrowed from this diverse repertoire were incorporated into Malay musical traditions in KL. In this case, “Oriental” was not so much viewed in an “Orientalizing,” or exoticizing sense in the way that Western academia might view it, but instead as an important way to promote a valuable component already seen as an influential factor within Malay traditions.

Other names used to describe the influence of this Islamicate stream and the repertoire flowing from it was *muzik padang pasir*, or “desert music,” and *sharqi*, which means “Eastern” in Arabic. I found individual *gambus* players using these terms occasionally in social media posts and in casual conversation. While the Middle East is northwest of Malaysia, the idea of eastern culture is bound up with British Imperialist and wider Western notions of the Middle East and Asia. Rarely did I hear anyone refer to this music as Middle Eastern or North African. If a given piece of music was Egyptian, Turkish, Iraqi, and so on, the piece itself was referred to by the specific demonym, but the repertoire as a part of the mixed Malay repertoire was generally described as Oriental, *padang pasir*, or *sharqi*. This intermixing is in no way strange to the Malay complex, as it is one defined by its adoption and adaptation of many traditions.

### *Inang and Masri*

While studying the various forms that make up the Malay genres that include the *gambus*, I encountered a dizzying array of musical terminology, most often referring to the dance associated with the presiding rhythmic motif that defines the piece, but also those terms associated with the type of ensemble or social gathering that traditionally went along with the performance of that genre. I was told that *inang* is a dance pattern that has the same rhythmic pattern and up-tempo features of *dangdut*. Ethnomusicologist James Chopyak defines *inang* as a “fast-paced masri” (1986:123). This rhythmic pattern was part of the *ronggeng* dance traditions

popular in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Malaysia (120). *Masri* is a bit slower in tempo and resembles the famous belly dance rhythmic pattern of the *beledi*, popular throughout the Arabic-speaking world (see Figure 13). In Arabic, the word “*masri*” means “Egyptian,” which is also the root of the Malay word for “Egypt,” which is *Mesir*. This makes sense, since belly dance music gained particular popularity in Egypt mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and spread around the world from there (van Nieuwkerk 2010:47).



Figure 13: *Masri* rhythmic pattern (Chopyak 1986:121).

Pak Norihan said that *masri* and *inang* are connected to *dangdut*. This claim is somewhat substantiated by ethnomusicologist Andrew Weintraub, who discusses the influence of these rhythmic patterns in *dangdut* in Indonesia (2010:63). According to Pak Norihan, in Malay music, the rhythmic components that reflect an Egyptian influence are the primary characteristics retained in Malay music. The other components of *dangdut* remain a distinct genre, mostly found in Indonesia but also Malaysia (personal communication, 14 May 2015). Thus, the Islamicate world eclipses the influences in this genre, which revolve around the rhythmic pattern known as *masri*.

#### *Ghazal Melayu/Ghazal Melayu Johor*

*Ghazal* combines Malay traditional melodies with influences from India, the Middle East, even Latin America, and developed in the state of Johor. According to *ghazal* expert, Pak Norihan Saif, *ghazal* was popularized in Johor in the early 20th century by army musicians, and primarily thanks to the musician by the name of Haji Musa bin Yusof, or “Pak Lomak” (see Figure 14). Pak Lomak was an army major who composed and transmitted many *ghazal* songs

influencing the Malay repertoire. Before Pak Lomak, at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a man named Ustad Alfa brought *ghazal* from India (now Pakistan) to Johor. Initially all the songs contained Urdu lyrics, but it was Pak Lomak who adapted these songs to the Malay language, setting the melodies to Malay *pantun* (quatrain) verses (personal communication, 14 May 2015). Norihan said that the first “true Malay *ghazal* song,” which was written by Pak Lomak, is called “*Seri Mersing*,” named after the town in Johor in which the army base was located where Pak Lomak was stationed (ibid.). This song remains an important part of the *ghazal* repertoire.



Figure 14: Photo of Pak Lomak circa 1920s. Photo courtesy Malaysian National Archives.

There are several names used to refer to the Malay *ghazal* genre, including *ghazal Melayu*, *ghazal Melayu Johor*, *ghazal Johor*, and *ghazal parti*. The first three names for the most part signify a single trajectory of an idiom that originated in Johor and has since become emblematic of Malay culture and practiced somewhat outside of the Johor region. The latter

term, *ghazal parti*, is often confused with the Malay *ghazal* but is distinguished in many ways. Thus, a separate subsection is included below devoted specifically to *ghazal parti*.

The Malay *ghazal* idiom epitomizes the convergences of Indic, Western, and Islamicate spheres of influence while also bringing in a fourth sphere that is not typically discussed in relation to Malay arts, the Chinese sphere of historical and contemporary influence. This last sphere influences *ghazal* in Malaysia by way of the syncretic theatre form popular throughout the Malay Archipelago in mid-20th century, *bangsawan* theatre, which has been discussed in detail by Tan Sooi Beng (1993).

Jähnichen and Chintaka explore ways that Hindustani music and culture influence the Malay *ghazal* (2016). While their study focuses largely on musical analysis to make these comparisons, there are many wider connections to the Indic sphere, especially with regard to instrumentation. The Western sphere is pervasive as well, including Latin American popular music characteristics, such as the influence of the *rumba* and *cha cha cha*, and Western popular music instrumentation, such as the guitar and bass. The Islamicate sphere of influence was historically less important, but I argue that today it is pushed to the center of the *ghazal* ensemble, including its spatial arrangement in performances in proximity to the rest of the band and in terms of the musical function of the *gambus*.

In historical footage of *ghazal*, including film footage provided to me by Pak Norihan, the *gambus* musician was often featured alongside other instruments, and not always positioned in the center of the stage. Furthermore, in rural and historical performances, the *gambus* functioned alongside other instruments playing countermelodies and embellishments (*bunga*) of the main melody. The core instrumentation of a Malay *ghazal* ensemble includes harmonium, Indian tablas, guitar, *biola* (violin), *rebana* (frame drum), *marakas*, *gambus*, and vocals.

Historically in Johor, the Javanese instrument known as the *kecapi* was also featured in Malay *ghazal*, but I found no use of this instrument during my fieldwork (Abdullah 1971:26). It has been noted that certain Indian features can be found in the *ghazal bunga*, including so-called “*sarigama* singing” (Chinthaka 2016:64). However, I was unable to hear the evidence of this. In the urban contexts, I noticed an increasing presence of the *gambus*, featured in the center of the stage and highlighted as a solo melodic instrument similar to the way the *oud* functions in Middle Eastern music, including the use of *makam*. I noticed this foregrounding of the *gambus* in the performance of multiple Malay genres, but in *ghazal* it is especially conspicuous given the Indian musical influences that are so pervasive yet presented as less important, eclipsed by the Islamicate influence of the Middle East and North Africa, despite their Indic Islamic origins.

#### *Ghazal Parti*

The difference between *ghazal Melayu* and *ghazal parti* can be confusing since they share a name, but the traditions have different histories. There is little information available detailing the history of *ghazal parti* and I was not able to conduct thorough research due to my learning of the genre late in research. I plan to revisit the topic after the dissertation. *Ghazal parti* gained popularity in the 1920s-1950s in Kepala Batas, Penang, Malaysia (Jähnichan 2014:1). The name “*ghazal*” was most likely applied in order to signify the frequent theme of love found in the songs, as most *ghazal* poetry is associated with romantic love, love for nature, or general beauty. The Arabic repertoire in *ghazal parti* is attributed to the Muslim scholar Haji Abdullah Ibrahim, who studied in the Middle East and brought back many songs to the newly established all-male Qur’an School in Kepala Batas in 1916 (ibid.).

*Ghazal parti* is the most obscure and mysterious genre involving *gambus* that was somehow bound up with Malay and Arab-Malay cultural heritage. It is perhaps the least

performed of all the genres mentioned here, and the genre most often tied to Arab-Malaysian identity to this day. When I was able to see a performance of this genre, it was performed for a mostly Malay audience by a mostly Malay ensemble. The repertoire is usually different from other *ghazal Melayu*, but sometimes overlaps, especially in KL performances.

The most typical *ghazal parti* song is sung using Arabic lyrics, but can vary. Jähnichen and Chinthaka note that “[t]he vocal features are subordinate and the lyrics are less important while the acting and speaking of the comedian are more significant for the entire performance” (2016:273). The comedian (*pelawak*) is a central feature of *ghazal parti* along with transgender dancers (*mak nyah*). Historically, *ghazal parti* is practiced in the states of Penang and Kedah in Peninsular Malaysia. While I was in Malaysia, *ghazal parti* traditions were continued in Penang by the efforts of manager Omar Hashim and comedians Harun Kastila and Yusof Hashim, or “*Chop Misai Kontot*” (personal communication with Yusof Hashim, 1 February 2016).

While I was not able to attend a performance in the states of Penang or Kedah, Pak Norihan showed me performance footage from his collection dating back several decades. Additionally, I was able to attend a staged performance in Kuala Lumpur hosted by JKKN. I found that the dancers and comedian emcee (*pelawak*) were the aspects featured most prominently in performances. As I mention above, transgender dancers, known as *mak nyah*, were an important part of *ghazal parti* performances. However, at the staged performance at JKKN, it became clear that female dancers were hired for the event and not the *mak nyah*. I discuss this event in more detail in Chapter 5.

### *Kumpulan Gambus*

This genre of Malay music known as *kumpulan gambus* is similar to what is referred to as *orkes gambus* in Indonesia, with a mixed repertoire of Middle Eastern and Malay songs often

paired with some Latin rhythmic sensibilities, such as the influence of the *rumba*. The typical ensemble comprises *gambus*, *biola* (violin), *tamborin* (tambourine), and *akordian* (accordion) (Nizam 2014:7). Situated on a platform stage known as a *balai*, or raised structure where rituals and functions are held, the *gambus* is the focal point of the group situated in the center-front of the other musicians (6). In the village context, *kumpulan gambus* usually accompanies weddings, circumcisions, or *khatam al-Qur'an*, a type of Qur'anic recitation that includes festivities involving food and music, or other Malay social events (5). During my fieldwork, Nizam Attan discussed the role of his father, Attan Hassan, in perpetuating the practice of *kumpulan gambus* in Johor in the early 20th century. Thanks to him, there are a number of records including photographs and documents containing information about how much musicians were paid and which groups were most prominent in Attan's era. According to Nizam, the *gambus* player was usually the highest paid with the vocalist a close second (4). Thus, there is a historical record of high value placed on *gambus* over and above other components of the ensemble, though this occurred in a genre specifically focusing on the *gambus*. In KL, I found that the wider idioms and genres of Malay music also featured the *gambus* as a prominent instrument, similar to the historical examples of *kumpulan gambus*.

### **Orientalizing and Localizing Gambus Transmission**

Privileging the Islamicate sphere in *gambus* music often manifested in a self-Arabizing process, or rarefied depictions of the Islamicate world as mapped onto Malay cultural heritage. I repeatedly perceived an Orientalist, Arabizing process in Malay music transmission through the symbolic power of the *gambus*. While some *gambus* musicians emphasized the Malay cultural traditions over and above the non-Malaysian Islamicate world, these musical characteristics were never explicit, aside from the opaque references to *bunga* and the Malay language. Other

musicians emphasized the influence of the Islamicate sphere over and above the many influences from the other spheres. In an article on *gambus* in Malaysia, the *New Sunday Times* demonstrates this point in its opening paragraph:

The delicate symphony of sounds conjured by the plucking of *gambus* strings will transport you to a land foreign, the eerie whistle of winds shaving the tip of sand dunes as it slithers across the Arabian desert. The silhouettes of camels, date trees and minarets against the setting sun as the clear, crimson-coloured sky disappears into the darkest shade of blue (*New Sunday Times*, p.5, December 13, 2015).

I repeatedly experienced the *oud/gambus* paired with Islamic cultural imagery, yet grounded in Malay traditions.

Another demonstrative experience was when I was invited to appear as a student on a Malaysian television documentary about the *gambus* alongside my teacher, Raja Zulkarnain Raja Yusof. The filming took place in Kuala Lumpur at a Hadhrami-Arabic restaurant, specifically chosen for its ambience. The episode was shot with the purposely chosen backdrop of Middle Eastern lanterns, pitchers, tapestries, and other emblematic decor. Thus I see this representation as a continued and deliberately Orientalizing process of Islamization in Malay culture. While crowded with Islamic cultural imagery from outside Malaysia, the theme of the television program was Malay cultural traditions, a part of a larger series known as *Orang Kita*, or “Our People.” This is but one anecdotal example of the many experiences I had where the *gambus* was bound up with both local and transnational ideas of Islamic cultural traditions in Malaysia. While this indexing of the *gambus* with the Islamicate world was frequent, I examined two major camps of Malay musicians responsible for transmitting Malay cultural heritage through the *gambus*.

## Two Camps of Gambus Transmission

I found these two camps represented by my two *gambus* teachers, Raja Zul and Pak Norihan. One camp, represented by Raja Zul, sought to elevate Malay music alongside classical traditions of the Middle East and wider Islamicate world. The second camp, represented by Pak Norihan, felt compelled to reference Arab music traditions as influential, but did not always privilege them over and above the other influences in Malay music. This camp framed Malay music as a localized entity unto itself. As Pak Norihan told me, “I don’t know a lot about Arab music and *makam*, but I do know about the Malay melodies and their proper *bunga* (ornamentation)” (personal communication, 11 October 2015). While this camp recognized the importance of the Islamicate sphere, it was presented in more equitable terms alongside the other spheres, for example, in *ghazal* with the use of Western electric instruments, such as the guitar and bass, or Indian instruments, such as the *harmonium* and *tablas*.

When I first met Raja Zul in 2013, he was teaching at UPSI, and before that ASWARA. At ASWARA, he was an apprentice to the famous Fadzil Ahmad and was being groomed to replace him. When Fadzil Ahmad passed away in 2006, many elders of Malay arts began to accept jobs at these institutions, eventually replacing Zul due to their seniority. This phenomenon demonstrates the difference between the two camps I describe, one that describes individuals who wish to elevate Malay traditions by focusing on a global musical influence from the Islamicate world, and another that describes those who wish to keep the traditions local, taught by rote transmission, and without explicit reference to their many global influences.

In my fieldwork, the latter camp comprised individuals who were employed by institutions such as ASWARA, *Istana Budaya*, and UPSI, and enjoyed seniority and status within the teaching community. These individuals were highly respected as elders. However, I knew

young students who moved to KL to study music, pursuing teachers who explicitly taught *gambus* according to the strong influence of the wider Islamicate world. In other words, young people in the urban context gravitated toward studies of Middle Eastern *oud* music because they felt that this pursuit was most relevant to them. This identification with an Islamicate transnationalism differed from many elders who were brought from outside the urban area to teach Malay music in the institutions. These individuals were often unfamiliar with the intricacies of Arab and other Middle Eastern traditions.

Many attributed this knowledge gap in teaching to cronyism in government institutions. At the same time, in KL I noticed that when events were promoted through government institutions, such as the National Museum, ASWARA, *Istana Budaya*, and others, the Islamicate sphere was highlighted. The Islamicate influence was also recognized by the senior faculty who were unfamiliar with musical traditions outside Malaysia, but nonetheless discussed their relevance and importance. As a result, they referred students to appropriate resources in order to gain this knowledge that they could not provide. Though I found this self-Arabizing and recognition of the importance and relevance of wider *oud* music ubiquitous in KL, when I traveled outside the city I experienced older generations feeling threatened by this alignment with Islamicate traditions outside Malaysia.

While attending a *ghazal* workshop hosted by *Yayasan Warisan Johor* (Johor Heritage Foundation) in Johor's capital, Johor Bahru, Raja Zul delivered a lecture on *makam* and its influence on Malay music. After his talk, several elder teachers forcefully, though still politely, rebuked him for privileging Arab identity over Malay, saying "Malay *ghazal* is actually Malay, not Arab" (*Ghazal Melayu itu Melayu lah, bukan Arab*) (July 2013). When I asked Raja Zul about this, he said "the old guys are afraid to learn new things" (ibid.). When I asked Pak

Norihan about this, he reiterated the importance of learning this history and its relevance, but that he himself did not know much about it and deferred to the expertise of those who have studied in places such as Cairo and Istanbul, such as Raja Zul. In a way, Pak Norihan was referring less to a history and more to a hegemonic teleology that privileges an Arabicized version of a Malay present and future, deferring to the cultural authority of these streams of identity pervading Malay artistic expression.

Throughout this thesis I highlight the importance placed on upholding Malay traditions alongside and as part of a global Islamicate sphere, while some prefer to distance Malay performing arts from this transnational sphere of influence. In his National Conservatory, Raja Zul taught over thirty *gambus* students, many of whom were already studying at institutions such as UPSI or ASWARA. These students, all in their early 20s and mostly male, sought supplemental knowledge of *makam* and *oud* playing techniques from Raja Zul. Many of these students came from rural areas in the Peninsula, mainly Johor, and some from Sabah, in order to study music at these institutions. These students represented a young Malay group that sought to study Malay tradition as an Islamicate tradition bound up with wider musical forms, such as *makam*.

Early on in my fieldwork, I met Wan, who was studying at UPSI with Raja Zul before he was replaced. When Zul left UPSI in 2014, Wan was forced to commute between UPSI in Tanjong Malim and KL (80 km round trip) in order to continue working with Raja Zul. While this was an inconvenience, he never complained about it, showing a great respect for his elders as he emphasized both of his teachers' strengths (Raja Zul and Pak Norihan). He stressed to me, "Raja Zul can teach *gambus*, *muzik Melayu*, and Arab music. Pak Norihan, more to *gambus* and *muzik Melayu*" (personal communication, 16 February 2015). When I asked if other students

were interested in learning *makam* and the history of *oud* music, he said, “I’m not the only one who [is] interested in *gambus*, *muzik Melayu*, and Arab music, there are several student[s] here who like to play this kind of music” (ibid.). I later learned that several other students were dividing their time between classes at UPSI or ASWARA and the NCA. Dividing time between these two camps myself, studying with Pak Norihan and Raja Zul, I began to understand the different conceptualizations of tradition and modernity in Malay music transmission in the KL area.

### **Traditional Versus Modern in Gambus Transmission**

As I mention above, the major components considered authentically “Malay” are usually the Malay lyrics and the *bunga* melodic ornamentations. Beyond this, a major difference in Malaysia between what is considered “traditional” Malay music versus “modern” music was the competition between the Indic and the Islamicate spheres of influence. The Western sphere permeates and manifests in all Malay genres that contain the *gambus*.<sup>9</sup> The difference between traditional and modern expressive forms is often a political one, as Tan notes about the development of *bangsawan* theatre in the 20th century. In her work, she discusses how *bangsawan* transitioned from a multi-ethnic popular form of entertainment to a codified form of traditional “Malay theatre” (1993:vii-viii). It is common for a previously popular genre to become mythologized as “traditional,” its narrative shaped to reveal many generations of continuity (ibid.). This narrative is true of many of the forms discussed in this chapter, including *ghazal*, *zapin*, and other forms falling under the *gambus* repertoire. Most of these were popular

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<sup>9</sup> I include in the definition of the Western sphere the important influence of Latin American musical characteristics, including rhythmic influences such as the *rumba* and *cha cha cha*, which became extremely popular in Malaysian popular music in the 20th century.

forms in the 20th century, and are now often painted as “traditional” and “old” (Jähnichen and Chintaka 2016).

In my fieldwork, the lines between “traditional” and “modern” in *gambus* music were blurred because the modern elements were often associated with long held traditions, such as those found in the Middle East. Yet these traditions are also perceived as long held, as I often heard musicians citing that the *gambus* belongs to the same family as the *barbat* lute of ancient Persia, lending historical prominence to this Malay symbol. According to the aforementioned Malaysian newspaper article about *gambus*, it is “the oldest string instrument in the world [and] [t]he *gambus* emits an unmistakable melody which denotes its Middle Eastern origin yet it remains as one of our country’s most prominent traditional instruments” (*New Sunday Times*, p. 5, December 13, 2015). Privileging the traditions of the ancient Middle East and showing their place in Malay culture “among the early traders in the Golden Chersonese” brings significant symbolic capital to the *gambus* as a Malay Muslim tradition united with a transnational Islamicate sphere (*ibid.*).<sup>10</sup> While unassuming on its surface, the *gambus* and its related genres were contentious due to two major camps disagreeing about what makes Malay music Malay, modern, or traditional. The definitions of these terms often revealed the identity politics at work in Malaysia.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In this chapter I have shown the wide variety of influences on Malay music transmission, so much so that it is almost impossible to define as a single genre, but instead might be better labeled a “music complex.” Given this wide variety of influences and the secular nature of

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<sup>10</sup> “Golden Chersonese” or “Golden Peninsula” was the name applied to the Malay Peninsula by the Alexandrian geographer Ptolemy in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, named for its mining of gold (Mohd. Kassim 2008:3).

*gambus* music, it is initially puzzling why such a strong Islamic identity narrative is mapped onto *gambus* performance in Malaysia. In the chapters that follow, I unpack some of the factors behind the power of *gambus* transmission to communicate Malay Muslim identities in Malaysia's plural society. In the next chapter, I suggest that the Islamicate sphere is most relevant to Malay musicians amongst the wide array of modern value systems at work in urban Kuala Lumpur.

### **Chapter 3: Authenticating Urban Malayness through Gambus Transmission**

In this chapter, I continue to ask questions regarding the ubiquitous indexing of *gambus* music with Malay Muslim identities regardless of explicit, discursive religious content. These platforms locate what has been called the “new Malay” in a modern, urban context; one simultaneously steeped in an Islamic cultural value system and a technologically literate, secular, and modernized identity. I show that the *gambus* transmission, as a secular mode of expression, authentically situates Malay Muslim subjectivities in the global urban center. I examine various spaces where *gambus* music is transmitted, including wedding receptions, state galas, museums, classrooms, offices, and virtual platforms.

#### **Majlis as Enunciative Sites of Identity Discourse**

Using the metaphor of an important concept in the Malay language, *majlis*, or “ceremonial event,” I treat each of these spaces of *gambus* transmission, including the *gambus* itself, as its own *majlis* or performative event. These events are what literary scholar Homi Bhabha might call “enunciative sites of discourse,” where the “slippage and sliding of signifiers” is fluid enough to manipulate while conspicuous enough—thanks to opulence and spectacle—to garner attention and secure the social imagination (Bhabha 2013:53). I show how these events display new and renewed tellings of Malay cultural identity in each performance. In urban Malay culture, I found that most social events were turned into opulent ceremonial rituals steeped in performative transmission bytes of Malay identity information. I argue that anxieties concerning how Malay identity fits into the urban trajectory of Kuala Lumpur as a representative of Malaysia is directly reflected in the kind of ceremonial production that exists within a *majlis*, in this case, those including *gambus* transmission. I show that the *gambus* works to complement the wider Malaysian urban identity by performing religious cultural identity through secular

expression, thus it is not contentious nor threatening to other competing modes of identity construction.

In Malaysian popular entertainment history, Malays were portrayed as living in rural subsistence economies (see Figure 15). This imagery was predominant during what is considered the golden age of Malaysian film, from the 1940s to the 1970s (Kahn 2003:159). While recent scholarship has challenged the urban/rural dichotomy in Malay culture, the association of Malays with rural Malaysia is nonetheless salient in the Malaysian popular imagination (cf. Stivens 2012). These racial classifications have a contentious past, which culminated in the infamous Kuala Lumpur racial riots of 1969 when the Chinese-dominated opposition parties gained significant ground over the Malay-dominated Alliance party. In response to the riots, the Malaysian government enacted various affirmative action policies to bolster the Malay presence in the urban economic environment. Thus, there is a history of political and social anxiety concerning the place of Malay identity in the urban center. Sociologist Sharon Zukin writes about ways that opulence can reflect an “anxiety about authentic pasts” (2009:543). I observed the *gambus* alleviating some of this anxiety by carving out elaborately staged Malay cultural events not as an alternative to KL’s modern, urban identity, but as situated within existing patterns of urban development and global identities.



Figure 15: Scene from the P. Ramlee film, *Bujang Lapok* (1957), featuring three Malay men from the *kampung* (village). Photo courtesy of RokatKini. Accessed 11 November 2017 <<https://www.roketkini.com/2014/03/30/kritikan-sosial-dalam-film-p-ramlee-oleh-zairil-khir-johari/>>.

Zukin discusses how the world’s growing financial centers are compelled to “maximize resources so they can compete for money and prestige that are conferred by deal making in every sector of the symbolic economy, from finance to real estate, to art, media, and fashion” (544). She continues to explain that a transnational class of corporate consumers, both local and expatriate, builds up the urban environment to reproduce a hegemonic “global urbanism” (ibid.). Kuala Lumpur is not immune to this global urbanism, reflecting similarities of built environment with other major global urban centers, such as the need for iconic skyscrapers, for example, the Petronas twin towers in Kuala Lumpur City Centre District. As discussed previously, companies aligned with Chinese Malaysian identity form the major local component of this push to global urban capitalism.

In response to this economic racial imbalance, the Malay-dominated government, beginning with the New Economic Policy (NEP) and the New Development Policy (NDP) that took shape in the decades after the racial riots of 1969, has allocated resources to promote a “new

Malay” urban middle class. These social programs encourage rural Malays to move to urban centers to go to school, work, and live by granting tax credits, scholarships, university quotas, government jobs, other benefits to Malay citizens. Urban Malaysia is dominated by performative transmission bytes that indicate a high level of value placed on technological literacy, English-speaking, and a modern global identity. Many of these include the use of English in universities and the model of the Western university itself, the ubiquity of the newest smartphones as reflective of other global centers, capitalist marketing practices, and more.<sup>11</sup> This chapter highlights ways in which Malays lean into another dominant value system in Malaysia, Islamic cultural identity, folding this identity into the urban milieu through *gambus* performance practices. This process of folding Malay Muslim subjectivities into the urban milieu is reflected in a number of urban performative transmission bytes in Kuala Lumpur, from fashion to architecture to language. *Gambus* transmission is one of these processes.

The performance of Islamic cultural identity is not without its challenges in this mainstream global urban environment. Hoffstaedter describes an informant who says, “It’s difficult for organizations that want to maintain the secular constitution to also represent themselves as Islamic” (2011:151). In other words, Islamicity, or what Hoffstaedter defines as “a form of Islamic space that accords prestige to those who can radiate and employ it,” is less effective on the new urban Malay middle class because it is an alternative, contrasting modernity to forces of modernity located in the urban secularized environment. *Gambus* transmission indexes Malay Muslim identity without the use of explicit religious content. I show how Islamic cultural identity is folded into this urban milieu not as an alternative, but as situated within it, authenticating Malayness in the fold of urban Malaysian identity that is increasingly secular and

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<sup>11</sup> It might be noted that smartphones have begun to infiltrate even the most rural areas of the globe. However, they still carry the byte-power of iconic modern, urban markers of identity.

cosmopolitan. I view this as a more subtle way to blend ideas of Malayness into the plural milieu of the urbanscape.

### **Unpacking the Gambus at Opulent Malay Social Events**

In January 2016 I was invited to attend a wedding reception of one of Malaysia's upper crust couples, not because I was there to rub elbows with the Malay-Kuala Lumpur elite, but to watch my teacher perform Malay traditional songs during the reception. The wedding reception and *kenduri* (lit. "feast") was lavish. Hosted at Kuala Lumpur's 5-star Le Méridien Hotel, the event planners spared no expense organizing a posh affair. I walked into the event to find that I was not on the guest list, which included Malaysian diplomats, socialites, and even the Malaysian pop singers Sheila Majid and Man Bai who gained wide popularity in the 1980s. I informed the security personnel that I was "with the band," and after some back-and-forth commotion that included speaking into lapel microphones and listening closely to earpieces, I was allowed to enter.

Greeting guests in the foyer outside the main reception hall was a *gamelan*. As the bride and groom entered the foyer, the *gamelan* quieted as a traditional *kompang* (frame drum) ensemble surrounded the couple, a traditional component of Malay weddings. Once inside the reception hall, the sound of the *gambus* filled the air alongside frame drums, guitar, bass, and violin, performing Malay songs for the guests. Guests were dressed in formal attire, a mix of Western and traditional Malay costume. Not far from the band, a lavish buffet lined the length of the hall. Elevated on a platform above the main guest seating area was the wedding party and select VIP guests, including former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, a close friend of the groom's family.

Sometimes a performative transmission byte is made more significant by its position within a wider enunciative/performative framework or symbolic ecology. The presence of Man Bai and Sheila Majid was significant, highlighting the celebrity and opulent aura of the entire event. These are both hugely successful musicians as icons of Malaysian pop. Since music is an important part of weddings, it might be expected that either of these guests would perform a song or two at the wedding celebration. However, while both gave speeches honoring the newlyweds, neither sang nor performed musically. Instead, immediately following the speeches of these honored guests was more music that featured prominently, the *gambus*. Enjoying the music, seeing guests mingling, and listening to notable guests delivering speeches while others savored their beef *rendang* (stewed coconut beef dish) all evoked a term in Malay culture, *majlis*. I submit that the lack of performance by these Malaysian pop stars made the presence of this *gambus*-centered Malay music ensemble even “louder,” and more prominent in its performative identity transmission.

Enjoying the music, seeing guests mingling, and listening to notable guests delivering speeches while others savored their beef *rendang* (stewed coconut beef dish) all evoked a term in Malay culture, *majlis*. While this term translates to “ceremony” “event,” “agency,” or some kind of political organization in English, the meaning is much more symbolically rich and loaded with significance in Malay culture. Clive Kessler illustrates this point by comparing the “highly ceremonialized” séance ritual in Malay culture known as *main puteri* to a wedding (1992:137). He writes, “a *main puteri* healing séance and a wedding ceremony alike are *majlis*, a meeting or audience governed by the solemn rules and forms of political occasions with their deliberative, even diplomatic, seriousness—their blend of elegant formality and finely edged strategy” (ibid.). Both Milner (1982) and Kessler (1992) argue that *kerajaan*, or Malay kingdoms/sultanates and

their subjects, including the pomp and ceremony contained therein, is a defining feature of Malay culture in practice and in the popular imagination. As Kessler notes, “Malay society and culture, as they conceive of themselves, rest centrally upon a political condition: upon people having and being subjects of a *raja*, a ruler. The polity, a *kerajaan*, is not only a ruler’s domain but his subjects’ sociocultural condition, that of having a *raja*” (1992:136). This pillar of Malayness is frequently overshadowed by more relevant value systems in urban Malaysia. However, I suggest the royal-like opulence at these types of *majlis* acts as an enunciative strategy to elevate other dominant value systems through performative transmission bytes, such as the *gambus*, that highlight the more relevant Islamic pillar of Malayness.

### **Royal Malay Opulence**

During the colonial era, the British built on an existing platform found throughout the British Realm by propagating and reinforcing Malay royalty in its governance of Malaya. By reinforcing a pre-existing network of Malay sultanates, the Malay monarchy became a mirror of the constitutional monarchy implemented by the British. The performance of Malay culture included the most ornate elements of traditional Malay ceremony, albeit stripped of much of its pre-Islamic Hindu-Buddhist influences, and replaced with emblems of power that simultaneously matched the British model of nobility and those that meshed with an Islamic Malay worldview (cf. Milner 1982).

Regardless of the particular spheres of influence manifested in the *majlis*, it is popularly understood that Malays value highly decorated, ceremonious occasions, evoking the aura of royal heritage (Milner 1982). As an example, the bride and groom at wedding ceremonies are referred to as “king and queen for a day” (*raja dan ratu sehari*) and sit upon thrones. Many social events I attended were highly ceremonial, whether they were weddings, political

functions, or semi-casual meetings, the *majlis* usually included at least some of the following components: speeches, music, elaborate food preparations, prayer, and formal attire. These types of *majlis* became ubiquitous in my experiences with *gambus* transmission throughout Kuala Lumpur.

While attending planning sessions for the Regional *Gambus* Festival (*Pameran Gambus Serantau*) hosted by the National Museum, the meetings generally followed the protocol of the *majlis*, or ceremonial event that I describe. At these meetings, I would arrive to find an elaborate display of food, including fried fish with *sambal* (chili paste), rice, cakes, tea, coffee, and finger sandwiches. The meeting rooms had a U-shaped table lined with executive-style leather chairs and individual microphones for each attendee. An excerpt from my field notes reads, “sandwiches and cakes with tea—no one is eating but continually encourage me to eat” (field notes, 25 February 2015). I distinctly recall feeling as though the display was simply that, a display. This memory is a meta-example of the performative dynamics of these events in the sense that I was witnessing a semi-lavish event that was hosted in preparation for another opulent event, the *gambus* festival.

The content of these meetings included discussion of elaborate *gambus* displays, opening and closing ceremonies, press conferences, VIP guest lists, and so on. It was here that I became acutely aware of the importance of presentation in all aspects of event preparation. Aspects of these events reflected British style opulence with reference to “high teas” and “luncheons,” but these components were somewhat expected and taken for granted.

### **Linking Malay Islamicity with Global Capitalism**

In Chapter 1, I mention three recognized pillars of Malayness: *bahasa* (Malay language) *raja* (sultan), and *agama* (religion, Islam). Hoffstaedter notes that due to the dwindling power of

Malay sultans and the increased use of English in urban areas, the last powerful pillar of Malayness lies in the performance of Islamic identity (2011:35). Whenever I attended a government function, such as the National Museum meetings I discuss above, two performative strategies were typically in place: the performance of Malay participation in global capitalism in the urban center and the performance of Malay identity as tied to a global Islamic cultural framework. During my fieldwork, my teacher, Raja Zul, performed at several government events that included top diplomats and politicians, including Prime Minister Najib Razak. I was fortunate to be able to accompany him on these excursions. These events revealed an intense identity negotiation with which the *gambus* unassumingly became intertwined.

One particular event musically highlighted the way that this third pillar of Malayness, Islamicity, eclipsed other pillars in Malay identity performance. In early July of 2015, I attended the annual Government Linked Companies (GLC) Open Day, an event held at the Kuala Lumpur Convention Center (KLCC) in the heart of the city and home to the famous Petronas twin towers. The place itself is a strong performative byte that acts as a beacon of Malaysian modernity. The GLC Open Day *majlis* featured exhibitions, forums, and family activities highlighting the developments of various government linked companies in Malaysia. Before the event was open to the public, I sat and chatted with the musicians of a *gamelan* that was hired to perform as the Prime Minister entered the event.

A common feature at opening ceremonies of this nature, including weddings and university convocations, the *gamelan* signifies a royal opulence that symbolically links to a time when many Malay courts, influenced by the courts of Java, employed a regular *gamelan* ensemble. Walking along a red carpet, the Prime Minister entered the event as the *gamelan* began to play, but their sonic capacity was drowned out by the commotion of the press

photographing and filming Najib as he walked toward the main exhibition hall. As he entered with his staff and security, the *gamelan* was nearly trampled over, completely ignored by the press, government personnel, and spectators present (see Figure 16). I thought that perhaps I was one of the few people present who was paying any attention to the music. Even the sonic presence of the *gamelan* was muted by the sound of camera shutters and the commotion of people shuffling and shouting questions at Najib.



Figure 16: Prime Minister Najib Razak enters the GLC Open Day Exhibition. Notice in the lower left corner, one of the *gamelan* musicians is somewhat visible. She is playing *bonang* (gong row), or what is sometimes called *keromong* in Malaysia. Screen capture of news video courtesy GLC Open Day 2015. Accessed 11 November 2017 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sx5C0vwKpR0>>.

To me this ambivalence spoke volumes about the stagnant and almost irrelevant musical presentation of a symbol of royal Malay opulence. Later that day, the *gambus* manifested during another event portraying a British-cum-Malay opulence during a “high tea,” which was hosted in celebration of the GLC Opening Day. Raja Zul’s *gambus* group was invited to perform as the guests dined at the catered *majlis* for top Malaysian bureaucrats, members of parliament, the Prime Minister, and corporate executives. Unlike the *gamelan*, this ensemble was elevated on a proscenium stage where all attendees could clearly observe the band dressed in Malay attire

(*baju Melayu*), performing Malay songs with the *gambus* featured in the center of the stage—the focal point of the entire performance. After the customary Islamic prayer, the chafing dishes were unveiled and food was served as the band began to play, beginning with a *gambus taksim*. While the music at this event might still be considered mere wallpaper to the larger focus on economic and technological advancements, the music was highly audible and visible, amplified and spotlighted.

Featuring the *gambus* in the center of the event is not entirely new, since *kumpulan gambus* groups would often feature the *gambus* in a central role during social events at least as early as the 1950s (cf. Nizam 2013) (see Chapter 2). This elevation of the *gambus* corresponds with the increasing Malay nationalism in the preceding years of the infamous race riots, though this is a rather speculative observation. The *kumpulan gambus* example is a traditional example of foregrounding this instrument. However, in performances of other Malay genres such as *ghazal* or *zapin*, other performance roles are traditionally showcased, such as dancers and singers. Pak Norihan explained to me many times that the *gambus* was not always central to the performance, but instead took a complementary role. I noticed the *gambus* increasingly located in the center at these types of events, revealing to me a process that privileged its symbolic power at such prestigious events.

According to Norihan, featuring the *gambus* prominently in *kumpulan gambus* is a historical example of privileging the Arab elements of Malay music, but something that was not always as ubiquitous amongst *gambus* genres. According to Norihan, there have been several “revivals” of this Malay Arabicization, which occurred in the 1970s with the popularity of Fadzil Ahmad, in the 1990s during the height of Mahathir’s Malay nationalism campaign and the later

1990s financial crisis of the Malaysian economy, and in the 2010s as evidenced by my field research (various personal communication with Pak Norihan Saif (2015-2016)).

Another example of this kind of opulence where the *gambus* was featured as a focal point occurred at *buka puasa* events, or breaking fast after sunset during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan. I am particularly interested in discussing *buka puasa* events that I attended at high-end hotels around Kuala Lumpur, which I attended for the purpose of documenting the live musical performances that provided entertainment for diners. These were some of the most lavish buffets I have ever seen, including every type of sweet and savory Malay dish imaginable combined with Western favorites. One buffet included a case of Baskin-Robbins ice cream while another had several chocolate fountains. The iconic food of Ramadan, *ketumpat* (rice dumplings) were fatter than I had seen them before, almost bulging through their diamond-shaped woven palm leaf sheaths. I could almost feel the vapors from the chili paste (*sambal*) seeping into my pores through the steam that emanated from the hotel pans and collided with the glare of the heat lamps, which looked more like spotlights to highlight the decadent display. These opulent events mirrored some of the other events described in this chapter, and so did their performative transmission bytes.

While the audience at these events was passive, treating the music as background noise, the sonic atmosphere was decidedly Malay. If not for the signs reading “*Selamat Buka Puasa*” and the musicians elevated on a stage next to the buffet in Malay attire performing Malay songs, a foreign observer might not notice that this was a Malay cultural event. Most of the patrons were dressed in Western formal and semi-formal attire. Much of the food reflected the diversity of Malaysian cuisine, with some notable Malay examples ubiquitous with Ramadan, such as *bubur manis* (sweet porridge) and *ketupat* (rice dumpling in a woven palm leaf). When I talked

with the band, they explained how busy they were during this time of year. At one *majlis*, which was hosted at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel located in downtown Kuala Lumpur, the *gambus* player told me that they perform almost every night and look forward to free access to the buffet as part of their payment. At other similar buffets, when there was no live music, the background music was usually Malay songs, but usually the more popular, electronic versions of the songs, only occasionally featuring *gambus*. However, when these events hosted live music, the *gambus* was usually a prominent feature. To me, this phenomenon also exhibits a strong visual association with the *gambus* as a signifier of Malay cultural identity.

In many ways, these events and the global hotels that house them are examples of situating Islamicity in global capitalism, similar to the GLC Open Day high tea event. Mandarin Oriental Hotel Group is a U.S. company with locations all over the world. The hotel represents the urban capitalist saturation and consumption that has become ubiquitous in Kuala Lumpur. Yet inside, *Buka puasa* events are designed to present the theme of a Malay *kampung* or village, a play on Malay traditional culture complete with a mock *rumah Melayu* or Malay traditional house built to hold the buffet tables. This kind of scenery, along with Malay traditional music, is not uncommon at shopping malls, hotels, and restaurants throughout Kuala Lumpur during the month of Ramadan. When the *gambus* was featured at these events, it was usually featured visually in the center of the stage, a focal point strongly indexing Malay Muslim identity.

### **Gambus as Majlis**

In the introduction to this chapter I mention that I consider the *gambus* itself as its own kind of *majlis* or event. An example of this is the strong physical presence of the *gambus* at *buka puasa* events mentioned above. Another example of what I mean comes from an experience I had at the Kuala Lumpur Craft Complex, a government-funded tourist organization that displays

various kinds of traditional Malaysian craft with a special focus on Malay architecture and handicraft. At a *gambus*-making event hosted by the Craft Complex, a maker from Johor Bahru demonstrated *gambus* construction while advertising his instruments for sale (see Figure 17). I noticed that they were priced higher than I expected at RM 2,000 (approx. \$475.00 USD). I also noticed that the playability was much less smooth than I expected, with high string action and a clunky feel compared to imported *ouds* of the same price.



Figure 17: *Gambus* making demonstration at the Kuala Lumpur Craft Complex. Notice the strips of wood forming the bowl of the lute. 13 September 2015. Photo by Joseph Kinzer.

I was told that this maker began raising the price of his *gambus* after students at ASWARA, UPSI, and NCA began buying imported Turkish and Egyptian *ouds*. In the case of these instruments at the Craft Complex, the design and carving was elaborate and visually impressive but the sound and playability was lacking. These instruments were also marketed to

non-musician consumers who used them as display pieces. When I asked makers about the Turkish or Arab style *oud* designs, they generally highlighted the use of strips of wood used to form the body. Since this is a practice that differs from other kinds of *gambus* construction that uses a single piece of carved wood, this emphasis is on the more iconic Arab construction quality, even though both practices are rooted in Arab culture. I consider this an example of an opulent material event that privileges the presentation of the *gambus* as a Malay cultural identity marker at a tourist event, performatively aligning it with the Islamicate world.

### **Politics of Performative Transmission Spaces**

When I began studying at ASWARA, I met with the dean of the Music Faculty, Ramlan Imlan. He told me that when the National Academy was first established in 1994, its primary focus was traditional music of all kinds found in Malaysia. Today, he emphasized that they encourage students to make these traditions relevant to the “modern world,” whether through fusion compositions, modernizing works with the use of new technology, or teaching through media such as staff notation—where previously the music was transmitted by rote. When I studied at ASWARA, there was a competition between Western influenced musical practices and what was considered “Malay” music, which was defined differently based on who was doing the defining, reflecting the previously mentioned camps of Malay music transmission.

ASWARA is modeled after Western arts conservatories with a strong emphasis on Western theory and musical influence, including jazz and pops orchestras. These influences are mixed with musical frameworks considered “traditional.” The traditional component of the Music Faculty is largely Malay in character, featuring ensemble classes in *asli*, *ghazal*, and others. Many students also perform in *pop moden* (modern pop) bands that fuse new and old Malay language songs into a modern pop arrangement. To me, the institution sought to strike a

balance between two hegemonic urban Malaysian influences: the West and Malay tradition/custom (*adat*). These two influences were often framed in terms of modern versus traditional and how the two could combine and be relevant in the urban context.

*Gambus* students made traditional music relevant to themselves and to their audiences through the Islamicate sphere by the inflection of what was called “Oriental music” into their practice, a genre label discussed in Chapter 2. The mere presence of Middle Eastern cultural expression, the *majlis* of *gambus* transmission and Malay tradition was elevated and made opulent. Since the *gambus* and its associated music outside of Malaysia was considered so elegant and exotic—as evidenced, for example, by the magazine article on the *gambus* quoted in Chapter 2—the status of the *gambus* as Malay signifier was elevated alongside a transnational Islamicate expressive trajectory.

During my time at ASWARA, *gambus* teachers Pak Norihan and Pak Yassin did not have much knowledge of these “Oriental” traditions, but their students were interested in them. In response, teachers encouraged their students to study Middle Eastern music on their own and to seek out supplemental teachers, such as Raja Zul—who once taught at ASWARA before branching out on his own due to various political and practical circumstances. In this performative transmission space, the predominance of the Western sphere as aligned with Malay identity was balanced, exoticized, elevated, and made opulent by the Islamicate sphere through the symbolic ecology of overlapping musical constellations revolving around the *gambus/oud*. Again, the instrument itself and all it connoted was a focal point on which elevated forms of Malay identity were based in these transmission spaces.

The transmission of *gambus* and all its associations within the identity framework of Kuala Lumpur did not end at the classroom door. Each week during my meetings and lessons

with Pak Norihan Saif, in his office at *Istana Budaya*, I was surrounded by a performative history of the *gambus*. Since there is scant written material on the history of the instrument and its surrounding genres, Pak Norihan scoured the internet searching for anything written about the *gambus*, including blog posts, essays, and newspaper articles. Lining the walls of his office was an essay-length chronology of the *gambus* and its history in printed pages, both in English and Malay. He printed out newspaper articles for me that discussed the origins of short-necked lutes, known as *barbat*, in ancient Persia.<sup>12</sup> On his desk was an *oud* method book written in both Malay and Arabic. Next to his desk was an array of lutes, including Turkish, Egyptian, and locally made style *gambus* Johor-style lutes. In Pak Norihan's performative office space, a clear presentation emerged that aligned Malay performative bytes with Persian, Arab, and Turkic ones forming a complex Islamicate performative event.

In so many ways, Pak Norihan's office was host to a *majlis* actants in Malay music transmission, an exhibition of *gambus* music, including its surrounding genres. As a meeting space, a *majlis*, a place to gather and participate in music dialogue, we sat and interacted with the music through recordings, through our conversations, and through playing various *gambus*. One of the most important components of this office exhibition was the list of important figures in the history of Malay music, to whose names and photos he constantly referred. It was important to Norihan that he illustrated not only the important figures of times gone by, but their progeny and students who continue the tradition today. For example, I purchased several vinyl records of *gambus* and *muzik Melayu* at various rummage sales around KL. When I showed Pak Norihan, his face lit up. I mentioned an album by the singer, Ruziah Chik, who is accompanied on the album by a *ghazal* ensemble that included a *gambus* musician. He was so happy to see that I had

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<sup>12</sup> I have also seen this reference to the Persian *barbat* in tracing the history of the shortneck lute in the organological research of Laurence Picken (1955).

found this record, and mentioned to me that this singer was an important figure in *gambus* traditions. I learned that Ruziah Chik's granddaughter, Jamie Chik, still performs and sings today. When he introduced us, he emphasized that she was a direct connection to the history of authentic Malay music, thus highlighting the living performance that is Malay music. It was important to Norihan that I understand the materials in his office were directly connected to living traditions, and not simply a stagnant archive. Yet the values reflected in these living traditions are contentious and open to debate.

As I discuss in previous chapters, the push-and-pull of spheres of influence becomes particularly evident in liminoid institutional settings. These transmission spaces became political battleground concerning what kinds of values were most important in *gambus* pedagogy. I view the kinds of strategies by those such as Raja Zul, who separated *gambus* practice from Western music theory, as a responsiveness to myriad ways that Malay musical traditions were contemporaneously performed outside their perceived traditional context. At ASWARA, the University of Malaya, and other institutions, distinctions were made between music, dance, and theatre faculties/departments, reflecting a Western-modeled institutional influence. This separation of arts disciplines was viewed as inorganic by many in the institution, and thus a performative response was proffered, a *majlis* that reflected a revival of traditional Malay identity. In the case of ASWARA, the response to this compartmentalization came in the form of a performative transmission space called the *Pusat Seni Pentas Tradisional (PuTra)*, or "Center for the Traditional Arts," which drew from multiple faculties/departments and comprised a physical site for a combined performative transmission praxis. During construction, signs were posted anticipating a "Grand Opening," and special events were planned to dedicate the space, another example that reflected an opulent, *majlis* character.

The negotiation of what it means to be Malay “has historically been wrought by the contradictions inherent in its colonial discourses” (Idrus et al 2014:1798). Institutions such as ASWARA and the colonial institution, University of Malaya, reveal responses to these inherent contradictions in the way they adapt their institutional models. For ASWARA, it was PuTra, and for UM it was the *Pusat Kebudayaan*, or “Cultural Centre,” which also combined theatre, music, dance, and visual arts, both research and performance, under one roof. Yet as grand narratives aligned with dominant spheres such as the West were resisted, new spheres of influences were reflected. For example, these cultural centers tended to lean toward traditional arts associated with Malay identities, and traditions considered Malay were often sculpted to reflect a specific Malay history, one that downplayed the Hindu-Buddhist and general Indic sphere of influence—despite the strong Islamic cultural influence of the Indic sphere on Malaysia. Despite this bias, these are credible academic institutions, and thus certain individuals worked to provide a full scope of understanding to the cultural nuances involved in arts transmission. Nonetheless, given the political dominance of Malays in these institutional settings, narratives of Malay hegemony found their way through to the *majlis* of performing arts centers, classrooms, and on the stage—utilizing specific performative transmission bytes combining Malay theatre, dance, and music to elevate Malay cultural heritage transmission, usually with a heavy Islamicate flavoring.

An example from my fieldwork—where specific grand narratives were privileged in transmission spaces—occurred during a visit to another staple institution in KL, *Universiti Teknologi MARA* (UiTM). In 2013, the Music Faculty created a performing group that traveled to London and Cambridge in order to perform “Malaysian traditional music” for UK audiences. In the performances and resultant CD album produced from the UK debut, four main genres were included: *mak yong*, *wayang kulit*, *ghazal*, and *asli* (see Figure 18). *Mak yong* and *wayang*

*kulit* do not contain *gambus*, but *ghazal* and *asli* do. All four of these genres were tied to Malay cultural traditions and no other *bumiputera* groups. Nor were these genres connected clearly with other large minority groups that have contributed to the region’s culture for centuries, including Indian and Chinese. Despite the historical links of Indic culture to, for example, *wayang kulit* and Javanese performing arts, these connections were downplayed in order to highlight a particular telling of Malay history.

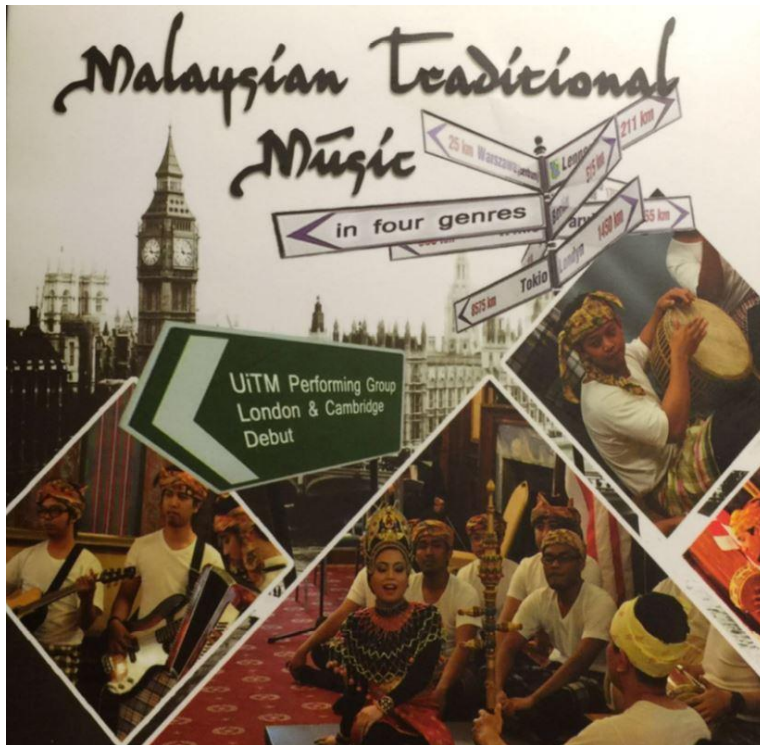


Figure 18: Cover of the UiTM “Malaysian Traditional Music” album produced by the Music Faculty and performed by the UiTM performing group for the UK debut. 2013. Photo of album cover by Joseph Kinzer.

The above example highlights how Malay musical histories as Malaysian histories become codified under specific kinds of musical sounds and images. Listening to this recording, the instrumentation includes heavy use of gongs, frame percussion, guitar, and *gambus*. The *gambus* is specifically associated with *ghazal* and *asli* music. Teacher of *asli* music at ASWARA, Pak Jai, described *asli* as a traditional Malay genre that is “slower in tempo” than

other Malay genres, and usually does *not* include *gambus* (*muzik asli* classes at ASWARA, March 2015). Meaning “original,” *asli* music in the UK performance of Malaysian traditional music contains a *gambus* and is indexed with the indigenous, “original” connotations of the *asli* genre as mapped to Malay identity. In my research I found genres increasingly featuring *gambus* as a way to insert Malay identity into indigenous Malay performativity that foregrounded Islamicate cultural identity.

I noticed that in institutional settings, Malay music was ripe for reinvention given its fluid oral history. As I have explained, in Kuala Lumpur, Malay traditions increasingly featured a Middle Eastern version of Islamic modernity in its transmission, despite the other major spheres of influence competing with this version (see Chapter 2). An interesting component of this mode of expressing Malay history lies in the fact that many of the musical characteristics of Malay musical traditions are historically Middle Eastern in origin, such as the *kompang* frame drum or the *gambus* found in several Malay genres. Yet, in contemporary teaching and pedagogy, these older forms of say, frame drums or Hadhrami lutes, were replaced with the instruments more iconically associated—at least in Malaysia—with the modern Middle East, such as the Arab *darabouka* drum or the Arab *oud*.<sup>13</sup>

When these iconic markers of identity emerged in this way, they were usually couched in terms of simple dichotomies, such as “traditional and modern,” regardless of the actual history and age. In my observations I found that during performances of Malay music, the use of frame drums such as *kompang* and *rebana* was considered traditional, while the use of *darabouka* was

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<sup>13</sup> While these instruments are not new to the Arab world, and thus considered traditional, they are perceived as contemporary instruments, contemporary in the sense that they have become more standardized as part of a pan-Arab music repertoire, and thus iconic of this sphere of influence. The use of Western staff notation and big band arrangement style, along with a standardized instrumentation in pan-Arab music arguably occurred after the Cairo Conference of 1932 (see Gordon 2014).

considered modern. The same was true for the Hadhrami style *gambus* and the Arab *oud*, which were considered more traditional and modern respectively. In this case, the two dichotomies referenced geography and ideas of modernity beyond the actual age or history of the instrument, since all of these instruments could be considered “traditional” in terms of historical occurrence outside Malaysia. However, many of these instruments came into prominence in Malaysia during many of my research participants’ lifetimes. Part of the appeal of a modern Malay identity paired with *oud* performance lied in its believed ancient origins in the Middle East and the historical connection, however imagined, between Arabs and Malays.

### **Shifting the Role of the Gambus to the Center**

The physical presence of the *gambus* also played an important role in performances. In observing the instrumentation of musical groups that performed at various types of *majlis*, I paid close attention to the spatial arrangement of the instruments. In the previous chapter, I mention how in the development of the *ghazal*, the *gambus* was not always part of the ensemble. Most of the repertoire included Urdu songs, derived from the Persian and Indian *ghazal* traditions. Pak Lomak was known to sing in Urdu and play tablas and harmonium in the 1920s (Connie Lim and Mohamad Fadzil 2011:42). Gradually, Malay musicians transformed the genre into what it is today, using almost exclusively Malay lyrics and combining instruments such as the *gambus* into the ensemble. While the name “*ghazal*” was associated with poetry and love themes in the Indian and Persian repertoire, in Malaysia, “*ghazal*” began to signify more of a musical event, or “salon” type of musical gathering, in addition to the importance placed on vocals and love-oriented themes (Abdullah 1971:24). Even though the roots of *ghazal* trace to an Islamic South Asian cultural history, these elements are displaced because they are not as iconic, and thus less powerful in their performativity of Islamic identity.

The *gambus* eventually became an indispensable part of *ghazal*, especially in the urban context. In Johor, it began as a rhythmic instrument, the function of which was to accompany the interweaving countermelodies of the guitar, harmonium, vocals, and *biola* (violin). In the 1970s, figures such as Fadzil Ahmad began incorporating solo melodic elements influenced by the Middle Eastern *oud* into *ghazal*, especially in state-sponsored *majlis* and recordings. When viewing old photographs of *ghazal* performances in Norihan's office, the *gambus* musician was usually seated in the back or in a circular formation around the other instruments in the ensemble, illustrating an equitable role that manifests both sonically and physically in the ensemble. In contemporary urban Malaysia, as the sonic role of the *gambus* shifted, so did its spatial orientation. In my fieldwork I found that during most *majlis*, such as weddings or government functions, the *gambus* was almost always centered on the stage as the focal point of the ensemble. Furthermore, the ensemble was also commonly referred to by guests as *kumpulan gambus*, or "gambus group," even though the pieces performed fall under the wider complex of Malay music, including *ghazal*, *zapin*, and other pieces that are not necessarily specific to, but usually include, the *gambus*. In Johor, *kumpulan gambus* historically did feature the *gambus* in the center of the ensemble, but this was not common for other genres. Perhaps this reference to *kumpulan gambus* in these contemporary urban settings reinforces this historical importance of the *gambus* as a focal point.

Another role shift in *gambus* transmission was the function of the *gambus* musician as vocalist. Past *gambus* players rarely sang, but in KL, I noticed that many *gambus* players were positioned in the front of the band as vocalists and players, reflecting a similar icon of the singer-songwriter guitarist, or "front man/woman" in a rock band. Thus these performative events simultaneously indexed a globalized pop music byte while also framing the *gambus* as a solo

melodic instrument with a privileged position in the ensemble, functioning in the way the instrument did in genres of the Islamicate world. Thanks to artists such as Fadzil Ahmad, the *gambus* as a marker of the Middle East began eclipsing other spheres of influence in the 1970s. I noticed an acceleration of this trend in contemporary urban Malaysia thanks to the interests of young students and the influence of teachers such as Raja Zul.

Thinking back to the aforementioned album by Ruziah Chik, I originally had not known the artist was a singer, because the album cover features her holding a *gambus* (see Figure 19). I was drawn to the record because it was rare to find a female *gambus* player. While she was not the *gambus* player on the album, her posing with the *gambus* told a story about the importance of this musical icon in the tradition. Beginning in the 1970s with the influence of artists such as Fadzil Ahmad, an increased foregrounding of this instrument occurred in Malay music. In the early 2000s, with the influence of Raja Zul and his students, an increased foregrounding of this instrument continued in urban Malaysian *majlis* contexts, drawing on the rich symbolic capital that this instrument historically contains.



Figure 19: Ruziah Chik posing with a *gambus* for her album cover. Date unknown, circa 1970s, according to Norihan Saif. Photo of album cover by Joseph Kinzer.

### Canonizing Cultural Categories

Scholar of Malay literature Henk Maier’s *We are Playing Relatives* is an extensive overview of the historical, cultural, and political twists and turns that make up “Malay literature” (2004). He explores this topic by pointing to the Malay language as heterogeneous and fluid by its very nature. He explains that the term *bahasa* implies not only the English word, “language,” but comprises appropriate customs and behavior as well. The title of the book, *We are Playing Relatives*, comes from a quintessential (as Maier argues) Malay story, *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, which outlines the sufficient conditions of Malay identity, comprising the acting-out, or “playing” the part of, Malayness, thus “playing relatives,” regardless of blood (ibid.).

This fecundity and fluidity of Malay works makes them hard to essentialize and canonize, especially in written form. Thus, each manifestation in novel form or through film is a performance. In oral tellings through music, the melody of the recitation and the beauty of the word-choice can change from one performance to the next. Maier makes the point that European scholars have done much to influence the idea of “Malay literature,” creating appendices of canons, thus solidifying an idea of Malay *literature* as opposed to oral traditions in the minds of Malays themselves. While this is the case, Maier argues that Malay writers have come from a wide range of backgrounds, geographically and culturally, united by variations of Malay language, and that the function of Malay stories is essentially performative, thus resisting homogenization. Maier considers at the end of the book other media such as the Internet and fiction to illustrate ways that Malay literature cannot be frozen, but instead adapts in order to achieve similar functions through history, that is, similar performances of beauty, of cautionary tales, of political warnings, of proper customs, of ways to live, yet through various media.

These ideas are transferrable to *gambus* lute transmission and wider Malay music, because as I have noted, Malay expressive performance is multifaceted, dynamic, and resists categorization while simultaneously bound up with identity categorization in Malay society. Furthermore, Malay identity expressions are fragmented and fraught with contradiction and irony. The ceremonialization, institutionalization, and canonization of Malay artistic expression reflects processes of homogenization where the very nature of Malay expression resists it, as Maier discusses. My teacher, Raja Zul, studied *oud* in Cairo and teaches *makam* to his students. He repeatedly told me that he “prefers Oriental [Arab] music to Malay music,” and that he is “bored” by *ghazal*, *zapin*, and *asli* (personal communications, 2015-16). However, when hired to play a wedding, he donned his Malay traditional costume and happily performed Malay

traditional music with zeal and with a high degree of proficiency. A common story amongst gigging musicians the world over, a specific kind of gig compels a certain kind of identity performance. In this case, it is one directly tied to imagined senses of Malay historical identity.

As I followed him to various *majlis*, such as weddings, government galas, and political ceremonies, his band's personnel would often change. Raja Zul was a master of locating musicians to perform at the last minute prior to a gig, often without rehearsal. While this was the case, I found that each member was fully ready to perform a fluid Malayness for the event. At the end of the shows, I interviewed several of these musicians, most of whom have wider interests outside of Malay traditional music. These gigs helped pay the bills, but there was something more meaningful than simply the monetary value placed on these events.

Many of the musicians at these events, as with most people, are descended from multiple ethnic identity backgrounds, mixed and complex as life ensures. One *gambus* musician with whom I became well-acquainted, Ismail Alsaber, described his ancestry as "mostly Arab," who migrated to Malaysia several generations ago. As with most *gambus* musicians with whom I worked in KL, he was serious about playing and learning Middle Eastern and North African *oud* repertoires. The canon of pan-Arab music was his preference, yet, he regularly spoke Malay, wore traditional Malay costume at functions and events, and performed Malay traditional genres. He was quite literally "playing relatives," or performing Malay identity within the context of a *majlis*.

While the example of a Malay performing non-Malay music alongside more localized Malay genres might not seem peculiar, in the same way that a Korean might prefer Western music, or a Japanese person who plays bluegrass, the "playing relatives" component is the hegemonic structure that demands a Malay Muslim performativity. Raja Zul builds his

professional, personal, and musical life on both a Malay performativity that is tied to genres and idioms such as *ghazal* and *asli*, while also aligning this repertoire and wider identity with the Islamicate world, which is foregrounded in government-sponsored *majlis* and privileged in other functions throughout KL.

On my most recent trip to Malaysia in August 2016, Ismail invited me to a *majlis* at which he was invited to play the *gambus*, an event sponsored by the Malay political party, UMNO. As we drove the 1.5 hours from KL to the event, which was located in Kuala Selangor, he described the event to me as a *samrah*, or “musical celebration” (personal communication, 4 August 2016). When I arrived, I realized the *majlis* was a continued celebration of *Hari Raya Aidil Fitri*, or the end of *Ramadan*. Unlike many of the Islamicate cultures in the Middle East and North Africa, in Malaysia celebrations of the end of the holy month of fasting and contemplation go on well after the Islamic month of *Syawal*, which is the celebratory month after *Ramadan*.

When we arrived at the *majlis*, already on the stage was a guest *orkes Gambus* group from Indonesia, dressed in white *thawb* robes, traditional attire worn throughout the Islamicate world, but less common in Malaysia unless associated with religious (Islamic) activities. This band performed both religious and secular tunes, the former actually quite rare at these types of events. Later, Ismail and his *darabouka*-playing friend joined them on stage to perform secular Arab pieces, such as the ubiquitous *Bint El Shalabiya*. The audience appeared to be mostly middle class Malay, donning semi-formal Western and Malay attire. Many of the men wore *baju Melayu* (Malay attire), including the *sampin* (*sarong*) and *songkok* (cap), while most of the women wore a *baju kurung* (blouse), *kain* (long skirt/*sarong*), and *tudung* (head covering). The main component of transnational identity performance was found in the music, the most

performative element of the event and a powerful political statement concerning Malay identity at this UMNO event. I suspect that the Indonesian *orkes gambus* was invited based on their religious identity as bound up with *gambus* performance. The musicians were playing relatives bound up with a transnational Islamic identity that tied together Malaysia, Indonesia, and the wider Islamicate world with the *gambus* as its focal point.

### **Museum Exhibition as Material Majlis**

In all of the examples mentioned in this chapter, the *gambus* is paired with several competing hegemonic forces. The *gambus* acts as a bellwether for the climate of identity politics in a given context, disrupting or reinforcing various dichotomies and categories such as rural versus urban, modern and traditional, and others I mention throughout this thesis. As a component of the 2016 *Gambus* Festival hosted by the National Museum in KL, an interactive *gambus* exhibit was created complete with a listening center, video footage, instrumental artifacts, photos, and poster boards with explanations of the history of the instrument. In addition to the physical exhibition, a virtual tour of the exhibit was created online, where a user could navigate as if walking through the exhibit at home using a computer (see Figure 20). In this exhibition the stories told about the *gambus* revealed important ways of classifying the instrument in terms of Malay cultural heritage, bringing up questions concerning how the organization of this instrument reflected issues in museology and organology. I am not so much interested in conducting classificatory, organological analyses myself, but more interested in unpacking the metanarratives found in the choices made in such exuberant displays/*majlis* of Malay traditional music.

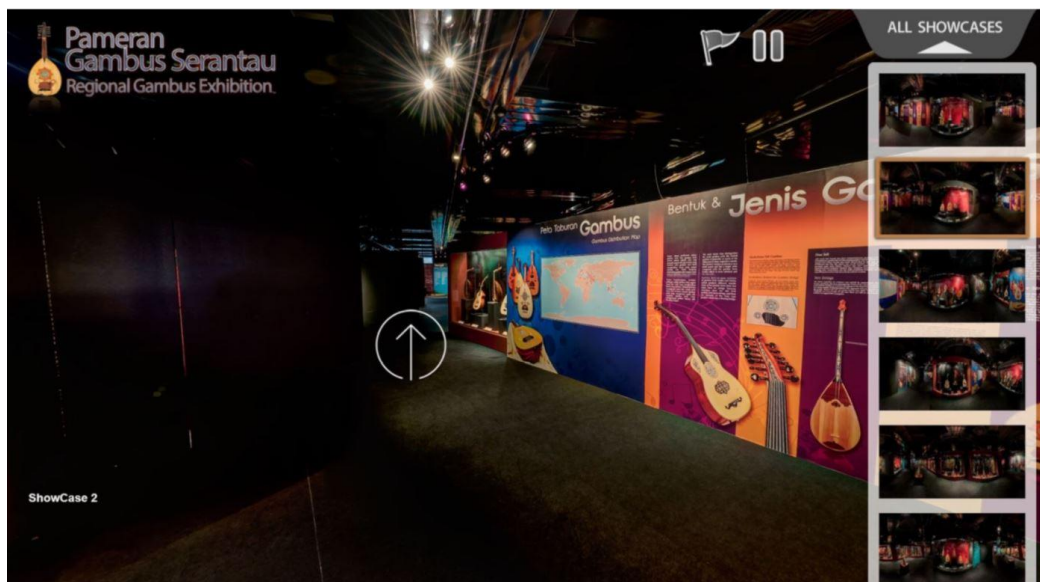


Figure 20: Screenshot from the virtual tour of the “Regional *Gambus* Exhibition” at the National Museum in KL. Accessed 3 April 2017. Screen capture by Joseph Kinzer <<http://art.conservation.my/gambus/>>.

In the early 20th century, Sachs and Hornbostel created a musical instrument classification scheme “intended to provide a universalist classification of the world’s instruments for both museological and scholarly use” (Kartomi 2001:284). The success of this system is apparent in its continued popularity in exhibitions throughout the world. In visiting the *gambus* exhibition, the agency of this organological system became apparent to me. While seemingly benign in its broad classification of four main groups of instruments: chordophones, aerophones, idiophones, and membranophones, the lack of culture-specific terms generated interesting cultural collisions in my field site.

As previously noted, identity categories are particularly salient in the Malaysian context. There are many layers of this dynamic packed into the physicality of the *gambus*. When I walked through the exhibition, because of the fact that they are both short-necked plucked chordophones, the *gambus* is paired alongside the various well-known Chinese short-necked lutes such as the *pipa* and the *liuqin*. This juxtaposition would never occur in Malaysia without

the force of the organological system pushing them together. The remaining portions of the exhibition were designed to build a story that aligned the various types of Malaysian *gambus* with the lute traditions of the Middle East and North Africa. Yet, because of their organological classification in this widely used system, the Chinese lutes made their way into the story. The *pipa* in fact evolved from the *oud*, but this connection would never be foregrounded in the Malay context by choice. The organological connection is an agency that highlights a cultural syncretism beyond the political agency of Malay hegemony. This reflects an example of agency operating beyond specific human intention, aligning the *gambus* with influences usually eclipsed by the Islamicate sphere. This kind of unintentional agency in *gambus* transmission is explored in further detail in the next chapter.

Another interesting way that instrumental materials manifested in the material was the exhibit titled the “Malaysian *Gambus* Prototype.” The Museum commissioned Turkish *oud* maker, Farouk Turunz, to design a “Malaysian *Gambus*.” Strikingly, the instrument was crafted in the Turkish style, while the Malaysian component was found mostly in the materials, specifically in the wood (see Figure 21 and Figure 22). During an interview with the local newspaper, my teacher, Raja Zulkarnain, who helped commission the instrument, is quoted as saying, “I finally managed to produce a *gambus* that has the identity of the Malay world as well as having better sound quality [than those produced locally]” (Khairunnisa 2015). Thus, this *gambus* prototype created a literal material link between Turkey, a prestigious representative of the transnational Islamicate world, and Malaysia.



Figure 21: Raja Zulkarnain Raja Yusof posing with the Malaysian *gambus* prototype. Accessed 12 November 2017. Photo courtesy Berita Harian < <https://www.bharian.com.my/node/100946>>.



Figure 22: Large model of the Malaysian *gambus* prototype at the entrance of the exhibition. 21 November 2015. Photo by Joseph Kinzer.

Raja Zul explained to me that the Turkish and Egyptian *ouds* are superior to those locally made in Malaysia, but the woods are designed for a desert climate, not a tropical one. Thus, the solution to this issue was to commission an *oud* made of local materials. In this exhibition, the Malaysian *gambus* prototype was positioned as the culmination of the many displays of various locally made *gambus*, mainly from Johor and East Malaysian Borneo in the state of Sabah. The Malaysian prototype was highlighted as an evolution of the Malaysian *gambus*, culminating in

the present, 2016, as a definitive moment in this evolution. The oud itself was displayed prominently in a glass case and the entrance to the exhibition displayed an enlarged version of the prototype, again positioning the *gambus* as an opulent feature of Malay identity at this cultural *majlis*.

### **Articulating Authenticity**

I have shown that the opulence of the event, often focused in visual components of materials in performance, were privileged in various *majlis*—defined in its widest performative sense—in and around Malaysia that involved *gambus* performance. As I mention earlier in this chapter, opulence can reflect an “anxiety about authentic pasts” (Zukin 2009:543). Given the contentious, fluid, and oral nature of Malay history and identity, the opulence found in various *majlis* and *gambus* transmission processes parlays a value system influenced by the British, i.e., the royal (*raja*) pillar of Malay identity, in order to elevate Malay culture as the dominant hegemon in Malaysia. In doing so, the colonial hegemon is both eclipsed by a new Malay hegemon and used as a platform to elevate Malay identity.

The royal pillar of Malayness is made more relevant and used as a platform to elevate the more pervasive and controversial pillar, Islamic identity. Given the dissonance that explicit religious organizations can engender in urban Malaysia, secular *gambus* transmission is folded into the urban milieu not as a stark contrast or alternative to Kuala Lumpur’s modern trajectory, but as part of it. This modern trajectory functions alongside the Western and globalized spheres of influence instead of competing with them. At the same time, this performance of Malay Muslim identity through *gambus* performance sufficiently maintains ties to traditional ideologies. This maintenance includes all three pillars, including the third pillar, the Malay language, which is a prominent aspect of *gambus* transmission. However, the most significant,

relevant, and opulent displays of Malay identity occur through the Islamic pillar as portrayed through the *gambus*, subtly and by circumventing explicitly religious identity performance.

In Chapter 1, I suggest that performative transmission bytes can function as “enunciative—or performative—strategies” in understanding how the *gambus* transmits cultural identity information (Hall 2013:4). In this chapter, I consider the *majlis* as a platform, or “enunciate site,” where this identity negotiation and transmission takes place (Bhabha 2013:53). I show that the performative elements of the *gambus* hold varieties of constructed cultural memory, stories told about what is valued in Malay society and culture while locating the indigenous Malay identity authentically in an urban and modern context. Ethnomusicologist Christina Sunardi uses “enunciative strategies” in her analysis of discourse surrounding concepts of mode in East Java (2017). She says, “I like ‘enunciative strategies’ as a concept for a number of reasons, including the emphasis that it places on the agency and deliberateness of the producer (be it a person, group, institution, etc.) generating the discourse” (65). In the next chapter, I argue that this agency is not always deliberate and that deliberate human actions are influenced by a number of agentic forces. These incidental forces manifest in various performative events through a symbolic ecology that compels narratives based on different kinds of material agency. I suggest that it is important to consider the wider implications of agency beyond human intention.

## Chapter 4: Exploring Material Agency in Gambus Transmission

I begin this chapter with a vignette taken from my field notes during my time studying *gambus* in Malaysia. These field notes became the inspiration for this chapter:

As I lay drifting to sleep in my hotel room, I heard a groan, an exasperated sound of tension releasing, eeeoowwwhh. Roused from my hypnogogic state, I felt a jolt of adrenaline as the vibrational frequencies stimulates my sympathetic nervous system. I sat up and moved my eyes toward the direction of the sound. It was my *oud*, laid next to the bed, as I had been too tired to put it away in its case before lying down. The wooden pegs turned as I watched almost every string fall out of tune, creating a tangled and limp web of nylon and metal coursing the body of my beautiful instrument. I pondered the numerous factors at work: the humidity, the pressure of the flight over still nagging at the instrument's body, or the low-tech wrapping of a string around a simple wooden peg to high tension. Surely all of these factors and more played a part in this seemingly spontaneous detuning. I realized in that moment that the materials were acting, attempting to return to their place in a natural assemblage, returning to a state from which they came, transforming before my eyes and ears amid the collective of which my body was one of many fluid assemblages (Field notes, September 2015).

During my fieldwork in Kuala Lumpur, I repeatedly noticed musicians referring to their instruments and interacting with their instruments as if they were sentient beings imbued with their own drives and desires, or at least objects imbued with great power beyond explanation. I found that there were many material factors influencing the capacity for the *gambus* to affect cultural identity expression, factors that went beyond human intention. In this chapter I explore the material agency in *gambus* transmission. Since this agency affects identity formations in sometimes unintentional ways, I call this “incidental agency.” This incidental agency is an important component of the symbolic ecology of the *gambus* and its performative function in the wider symbolic ecology of Malay identity transmission. This chapter outlines several types of agency and how these types manifest in transmission contexts.

As I show, sometimes *things* fall apart and disrupt human plans, sometimes they push and pull individuals in new social directions, and sometimes humans bestow things with personhood. Inside each of these relationships between humans and things exists a negotiation of agency,

which I define simply as the power to produce change. As ethnomusicologist P. Allen Roda reminds, “[A]ll of these inanimate things have an impact...It is not that they have intention, but that they influence outcomes. Agency is not something that is possessed, but rather emerges through action” (2015:316). By reducing a place, its spaces, people, and objects to a baser and equitable materiality—where people as much as their tools, including their musical instruments, are material culture—I focus on the forces that affect actors in a network. More specifically, I analyze the ways that materials affect outcomes, thus affecting identity formations and their continued transmission.

I explore agency as heterogeneous, arguing that widening the lens beyond anthropocentric models contributes to a broader and more nuanced ethnographic understanding of cultural phenomena, particularly the competing values in a system of identity formation, and in this case, Malay identity. This chapter offers ways to explore the agency behind value articulations in musical expression by looking at the symbolic ecology of the *gambus* in Malaysia. These value articulations include expressions of norms and standards surrounding Malay Muslim cultural expression, or responses to these norms and standards. I examine expressive value articulations through what I have called performative transmission bytes, which store cultural information in material bodies that compete with other bodies to transmit emergent and re-emergent value information in a social environment. Drawing on my ethnographic fieldwork in Malaysia, I let the *gambus* guide me through the transmission of identity formations in three arts institutions that are located in the Kuala Lumpur metropolitan area: The National Academy of Arts, Culture, and Heritage (ASWARA), The National Conservatory for the Arts (NCA), and the Ipoh Experimental Arts School (IEAS).

In this chapter I am influenced by Actor-Network Theory (ANT) as promulgated by scholars such as Bruno Latour, who do not necessarily promote the idea of intentionality in things but focus on their contingent properties that allow for conditions of intentionality and meaning making by humans (2007). One possible criticism of ANT is that it relies too much on the judgment of the researcher to determine which actors are important and valued over others in a given network. I try to avoid this pitfall by letting the *gambus* guide me through its own agentic process as it interacted with the agency of other people, things, and institutions in my fieldwork. My approach draws primarily from the work of political theorist Jane Bennett (2010), who is influenced by ANT, but expands upon its constructivism by reinvigorating a theoretical approach that allows for a consideration of the “force” of things, and not necessarily their intentionality in the same ways that humans can have intention. It is useful here to consider philosopher Kim Sterelny’s (2001) distinction between “drive” and “desire” in agents, where drive accounts for trigger mechanisms that result in action that are not mentally represented as desire. While Sterelny discusses ways in which biological organisms can act without mental representation of the world as “situated agents,” I find it useful to apply this distinction to non-biological agents as well (243).

This drive results in what I call incidental agency, arguing that such a conception of driving forces can be widened to include the symbols from which people draw to construct their senses of self and world, symbols that emerge incidentally based on a wider ecology. Thus, humans that find themselves triggered by cues in this ecology are representing their world mentally, but are in a way situated agents in that these symbolic cues hold a power to motivate representation that supervenes on conscious choice. Thus, my phenomenology in this chapter pays particularly close attention to the situated, incidental agency of signs and symbols, and how

humans interact with this agency that is derived from material forces. This line of reasoning is also influenced by historian Laurie Sears' concept of "situated testimonies," which she uses to refer to ineffable experiences about the past that emerge in narrative form in Indonesian literature (2013). The agency behind this process, in my view, is what I call incidental agency, which is part of a symbolic ecology, or the way symbols emerge and how they are organized within a physical and conceptual environment. Humans then react to and inform their worldviews and experiences of identity transmission guided by this agency both consciously and not.

As introduced in Chapter 1, Jane Bennett develops her theoretical framework for understanding this kind of material interaction that she calls "vital materialism," which in my view includes the physical human body, including the mind, as well as the materials with which it interacts (2010). Focusing on what Bennett calls "thing-power," I shed light on *gambus* transmission processes in urban Malaysian arts institutions (2). I reveal the wider implications of the institution as a medium and a cultural archive through which historical conceptions of cultural identity—including notions of nation and race in Malaysia—are remodeled and retold. I do this by unpacking and at times anthropomorphizing the materials found within them. Utilizing this approach, I show that discovering where the agency of both people and objects overlap in the transmission of music provides a more nuanced understanding of the field in which they are situated beyond what can be achieved by using an anthropocentric lens.<sup>14</sup>

Expanding on ethnomusicologist Elliot Bates' exploration of the "social life of musical instruments" (2012), I focus on the *gambus*. Bates writes, "I am arguing for a paradigm that

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<sup>14</sup> This approach purposely applies intention to unintentional processes, analyzing phenomena through a lens of what philosopher Immanuel Kant would call "purposiveness-without-purpose" (Jones 1975:96-97). I thus apply a teleological frame to materials within the aforementioned arts institutions, arguing that a deeper understanding of culture is possible by investigating the "as if" purposiveness of objects, regardless of but including the agentic drive and desire of the materials—including human bodies—in question (ibid.).

encompasses the full range of possible human-object-divine relations, as seen in instrument making, performance, musical healing, and numerous other domains” (371). This chapter discusses three kinds of possible agency that govern material agency, including negative (recalcitrant), positive (driving), and anthropomorphic agency. Each of these overlap and influence one another. While my aim is to examine the institution holistically with vital materialism in mind, for practical purposes I use the *gambus* as a concrete example to anchor my approach. Musical instruments are fecund in their agency and meaning making, as they fill up space both visually and aurally, in addition to extending the materiality of the player’s body. All of these aspects of instruments are vital materialisms in my conception and components of the symbolic ecology of *gambus* transmission.

To make this last point, I draw briefly on cognitive research. The studies from which I draw provide evidence for quasi-structural contingencies that are placed upon human beings in and as part of the environment, contingencies such as the plastic physiology of the human brain. While I view these structures as affecting social phenomena, I recognize the mutually contingent relationship between observed, yet dynamic, structures and social processes. In other words, I recognize that social phenomena and, for example, biology, affect one another multidirectionally. Cognitive research helps me to understand how cultural processes work by shedding light on how individuals think about and perceive them. In other words, thinking about and perceiving cultural processes involves the brain as physical matter.

While I am not arguing for a hardline version of structuralism, I believe that it is important to look at physical and material frameworks from which social phenomena effervesce and within which they intermingle. These frameworks are a good place to begin while also bolstering the argument for dialogues between disciplines that utilize different methods and ask

different questions, yet contribute to a wider understanding of human phenomena, however disparate. As Bennett notes, “Humanity and nonhumanity have always performed an intricate dance with each other. There was never a time when human agency was anything other than an interfolding network of humanity and nonhumanity; today this intermingling has become harder to ignore” (2010:31). As I show through examining the modes of material agency described below, performative transmission bytes gain their power from the intermingling of human bodies and sound bodies, including musical instruments and the materials from which they are constructed.

Bates (2012), similar to others in anthropology and the social sciences (Mintz 1985; Appadurai 1986), points to the “social life of objects” by highlighting their historicity (2014). This approach examines the ways in which the form and meaning of objects change as they age, detach from, and reattach to various socio-cultural collectives, or become embedded in new relations with new things over time (Bennett 2010:57). Maria Sonevitsky describes a similar approach:

Musical instruments, the musician's extra-corporeal ‘voice’ that produces sound in time, mediate the act of sound-making between the musician and the music, and therefore constitute a unique category of ‘things’ to submit to the question: how does an inanimate object express its ‘social life’? Through their morphological, metaphorical, and historical contexts, musical instruments index a variety of socially prescribed attributes (2008:102).

In his study of the *tabla* industry, Roda assesses this global industry as an ecosystem, similar to my symbolic ecology approach but focused on the loosely defined monetary economy of *tablas*. Roda writes about how thinking about instrument ecologies opens up opportunities for a more empirical, i.e., physical analysis of social relationships that are bound up with material connections (2015:332). Influenced by these studies, I use the *gambus* and its symbolic ecology to illuminate emergent social values in Malay identity formation.

Building from other ethnomusicological studies that focus on material culture, such as Sonevitsky (2008), Bates (2012), Dawe (2013), and Roda (2015). I outline three types of agency in the aforementioned arts institutions, ASWARA, NCA, and the IEAS. I show that recognizing these three types of agency and understanding the agentic forces of instruments that go beyond human intention can lead to a more nuanced and successful understanding of how the materials of music transmit cultural identity information as performative bytes.

### Recalcitrant Bodies, Negative Agency

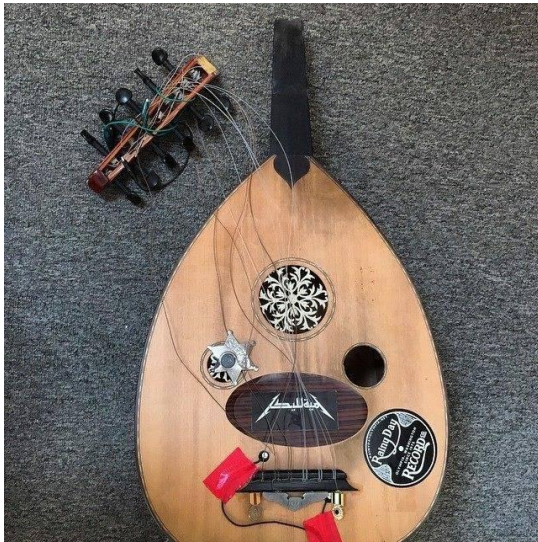


Figure 23: *Gambus* display by *Space Gambus Experiment*. 2015. Photo courtesy of Kamal Sabran.

As the above photo (Figure 23) and opening vignette of this chapter imply, a large component of material agency constitutes a negative, recalcitrant force. In other words, physical bodies can “mess up” human plans. Even at a low level this recalcitrant force operates constantly. Each day I tune my instrument and each day it resists my body’s agency, interrupting my plans until I accept its agency as part of the process. In thinking about the recalcitrant force of things in music making, I take a case example from The Ipoh Experimental Arts School (IEAS).

According to its founder, Kamal Sabran, while its name denotes a city that is located approximately 200 km north of Kuala Lumpur, the Ipoh Experimental Arts School “does not exist only in a form, but is a space in mind where the idea exists” (personal communication, October 13, 2015). In fact, I found that the School is more of a studio, where artists from around the world collaborate, contributing sounds to Kamal’s experimental noise collages, a result of his efforts as a “noisician” (personal communication, March 27, 2015). The “students” or contributors to this project learn from their physical environment, and there are no teachers other than materiality itself.

The School’s main project is known as the *Space Gambus Experiment*, founded by Kamal, but never fixed in its personnel. Collaborators, both human and non-human, have included sounds as diverse as the noise of the ocean, birds, Kamal’s children, musicians making recordings on their computers in Portland and Toronto, myself playing *gambus* in my apartment. Collaborators have also included many physical objects. These objects include those both humanly organized for the purpose of musicking, such as a children’s electronic piano, and those whose purpose reflects extra-musical human agency, such as a rotary telephone repurposed for experiments in what Kamal calls the “lab.”

As the name implies, the focus of the lab’s efforts, both symbolically and sonically revolve around the *gambus*. However, the focus of this lab is much different than the *gambus* transmission in KL. Kamal’s productions responded to the solidified performative transmission bytes that were formed by such institutions as ASWARA and NCA, those who sought to elevate Malay identity alongside classical traditions of the Islamicate and Western worlds. While Kamal was a deep admirer of these traditions, he explained to me that the more “rules” he learned, the less his *gambus* could “speak” for itself (personal communication, 26 March 2015). In this way,

he allowed the agency of the instrument itself to disrupt people's expectations of identity formations strongly associated with *gambus* transmission. With a Ph.D. and M.A. in new media arts, along with a B.A. in graphic design all from Universiti Teknologi MARA (Shah Alam, Malaysia), Kamal is accustomed to thinking about music and sound through a unique lens. When I accompanied him to his events, he seemed to delight in the knowledge that people associated so much identity information with the *gambus*. When he performed, audience members were often palpably taken aback. After one show, I remember him smiling as he said, “[s]ome people were covering their ears” (personal communication, 27 March 2015).

Inspired by the likes of John Cage, Kamal explained his dream for a “prepared *gambus*,” an homage to Cage's prepared piano. Utilizing the instrument beyond its intended musical purpose, Kamal created sounds from, for example, the winding and creaking of the twisting wooden tuning pegs, or the sounds of loose strings clanging together recorded on a loop pedal and repeated within a larger cacophony of sound. Related to the vignette that opens this chapter, Kamal sometimes allowed his *gambus* to “tune itself,” letting the instrument guide the creative process.

It is interesting to note that the act of intentionally letting go of the agentic reigns and allowing the instrument to guide the process is something that would probably only occur in such an “experimental” setting. This example of experimental musicking, or “noising/sounding,” highlights the typical active resistance of humans against other non-human actants in expressive culture by doing the reverse, forgoing the supremacy of human direction in the artistic process. These disruptions take performative transmission bytes away from their “nests” as I describe them and place them in a new nest. The performative transmission bytes of timbre, visual appearance, and name, still draw from the symbolic ecology bound up with Malay identity

transmission, but highlight the fragility of the symbolic ecologies that form socio-cultural identities.

Another example of the recalcitrant force of objects affecting musical aesthetics comes from the Malay musical genre known as *ghazal*. After listening to some old recordings of *ghazal* groups in Johor, such as those by *Sri Pelangi*, I noticed that the Johorian players, especially those playing *gambus*, often sound out of tune. When I asked my contacts about this, they informed me that the musicians deliberately allowed the *gambus* to fall out of tune. The implication is that they appreciated the slightly “off” aesthetic. However, the vocal lines usually did not follow the differently tuned instruments. This phenomenon reminds of the well-documented literature on Sundanese music that describes fixed-pitch instruments accompanying melodies in sometimes completely different tuning systems (Kunst 1973:354). The idea of allowing the *gambus* to fall out of tune is also similar to the aesthetic concept of *ombak* in Balinese gamelan, which utilizes acoustical beating as a result of two close, yet not exactly tuned pitches played simultaneously (Tenzer 2000:453). It might also be argued that this loose heterophony resembles a similar aesthetic in Arab *takht* playing, though Malay musicians rarely spoke of the *takht* influence.

Applying my vitalist materialist thinking to the situation, I asked whether the instruments were simply difficult to keep in tune due to the tropical climate. I wondered if perhaps the musicians were simply giving in to the instrument’s agency, letting it guide the distinctive aesthetic. One KL musician told me that the intonation was a result of “laziness,” and that a combination of discipline and a better quality instrument would better suit the music. However, when comparing to similar phenomena in music around the world, I wonder if this phenomenon indeed a combination of material agency and a resultant aesthetic that expresses the raw, often love and lament-themed, emotions of the *ghazal* songs. Either way, even in the case of pure

laziness, the instrument's agency is was work. Furthermore, the identity information stored in these intonational bytes mark contrasting features of rural, traditional (i.e. historical) *gambus* transmission and the transmission in KL that was viewed by many as aspiring to be more sophisticated than the forms found in rural Malaysia's past.

The previous examples show ways in which we can complicate agency in order to better understand, as Malinowski (1922) writes, "what is really going on here" by looking at nonhuman agency. However, with a vital materialist approach, it is important not to assume nonhuman or human agency. For example, when I began taking lessons under Raja Zul, founder of the NCA, I discovered how easy it is to automatically privilege certain kinds of agency over others when assessing a situation. While the NCA had official accreditation from the Malaysian Ministry of Education, it had yet to establish an official space for its headquarters. My *gambus* lessons were held at various locations around Kuala Lumpur, including Starbucks and other Western chain restaurants, the University of Malaya, the Malaysian Tourism Center, and the National Museum. I could not help but think about recalcitrant bodies interrupting my plans, as some of these spaces were cramped, loud (e.g., restaurants), and physically ill-equipped for music lessons.

When I began brainstorming with Raja Zul about ways to raise money for the fledgling academy, he acknowledged the need to raise funds, but also explained his vision for the NCA as similar to the spaces where *oud* music is transmitted in places such as Egypt. He described his experience studying at the Arab Oud House in Cairo with *oud* master, Naseer Shamma, for several months at a time in 2004, 2005, and 2007. While there was a venue for performances at this institution, Raja Zul explained that lessons were often held at local cafés in public places throughout the city. I began to see that Raja Zul's vision for a new conservatory for *gambus* was modeled after his experience in one of the world's most prominent cities for learning the *oud*:

Cairo, Egypt. Therefore, if I privileged my immediate assumption about the lack of funds, I may have missed the intentional indexing of the NCA with institutions in the Middle East and North Africa.

Furthermore, the fact that Zul chose mostly secular, globalized spaces, such as Western chain restaurants in and around KL to teach lessons, further indexed the NCA and a traditional icon, the *gambus*, with a specifically urban Malay identity. I end with this example because it shows how the types of agency overlap and can be misconstrued depending on a human observer's—in this case my own—interpretation. Something I initially interpreted as the negative, recalcitrant forces of limited funding and space, turned out not to be the real agentic driver. As it turned out, the cramped spaces were performative transmission bytes that drew on the urban ecology to align with performative spaces that act as bytes of Islamicate identity models in *gambus* transmission practices in KL. Thus, what I initially interpreted as a recalcitrant force was actually a positive, driving agency propelled through the performative transmission byte of the *oud/gambus*.

### **Positive, Driving Agencies and the “Pull” of Things**

Recent work in ethnomusicology and music cognition has emphasized the possibilities for music to heal (Bakan 2015, Maloy and Peterson 2014). Upon my first meeting with Raja Zul, he explained that while he was traveling outside of Malaysia to learn from *oud* masters in Cairo, Istanbul, and from an Iraqi master in Australia, he learned about the idea that the *oud* has the ability to heal illness by physically regulating the human body's fluids. He explained that the lunar cycle affects the water on the planet, not only that which is contained in the oceans and streams, but in the human body as well. By timing certain points in the lunar calendar with *oud* playing, the vibrating strings resonate with the instrument's wood, sympathetically resonating

with the body's fluids. In his view, this combination of physical forces could regulate overall health and wellbeing. I later learned that many of these ideas were propounded by the famed *oud* master, Ziryab, in Cordoba in the medieval Islamic period, who dyed the strings various colors according to Aristotelian humors in the body (Jayyusi and Marín 1993:117).

As early as the Middle Ages, Arabs regarded the *oud* as a highly potent mechanism for healing, along with other lute instruments, such as the Persian instrument known as the *tar*: "Just as the music of the *oud* was thought to have healing powers elsewhere, the *tar* was prescribed for soothing melancholy, insomnia, muscle spasms, and headaches (Stanton et al 2012:166).

Another example of the healing powers of Middle Eastern music is the Andalusian *nuba* (*nubat* pl.), which is a modal pattern that can supposedly regulate the humours of the body (Davis 2004). These examples highlight ways in which humans can imagine modes of agency beyond and combined with anthropocentric ones. Thus, without needing to assess the actual efficacy of these healing agents, we can view them as examples of *perceived* positive material agency. This is a topic I would like to explore in more detail, but I was not able to collect enough data about how this might be practiced in Malaysia. The power of the *gambus* to heal was frequently mentioned to me, but no one was serious about its practice. The idea was the powerful object in this case.

In my work with the IEAS, I was fortunate to be able to contribute some recordings of my own *oud* playing to *Space Gambus Experiment's* work on the soundtrack for a new Malaysian independent film, for which Kamal was commissioned as music director. Kamal sent me some clips electronically and I recorded myself playing along with them in my Kuala Lumpur apartment. He then digitally cut and rearranged my contribution, along with those of many others, adding it to the collage of sound that made it to the final cut. The film, titled *Jagat*

(“Bad”), was created by the up-and-coming Malaysian filmmaker Shanjhey Kumar Perumal. Serendipitously, Perumal’s decision to use a *gambus/oud*-focused soundtrack provides a poignant example of the layers of agency at work in Malaysians’ daily lives, specifically in this case, as it relates to music and sound.

The film is a play on classic Bollywood and “Tollywood” (Tamil) action films, but significantly transforming the genre and defying the viewer’s expectations, not least for the soundtrack. In a Facebook post promoting the film, Perumal writes:

Some people have asked us why our trailers don't look like the usual Tamil movie trailers, or why our soundtrack does not sound like typical Indian music. The answer to these questions is very simple. JAGAT may be a Tamil movie (about 70% Tamil dialogues), about a Tamil family in Malaysia, about the struggle of Indian Malaysians who left the rubber estates for a new life in the cities... but we made this movie for all Malaysians to watch. The cast and crew are made up of Malaysians from all races and backgrounds. The theme music is composed by a great friend Kamal Sabran from the SPACE GAMBUS EXPERIMENT. We wish all Malaysians will be able to immerse themselves into this story. We don't know if we have achieved this, but we have given our best to produce a Malaysian movie, for all Malaysians (21 October 2015).

As I discussed the film’s soundtrack with Perumal during a private screening of the film, he explained that part of his reason for choosing a *gambus*-focused soundtrack was because he “felt it represented Malaysia as a whole” (personal communication, March 28, 2015). This response intrigued me because I had previously only thought of the *gambus* as linked to specifically Malay Malaysian culture. Apparently, however, the physical, sonic waves permeated the physical environment—not unlike contagion theory—humanly-intended or not and became a performative byte for a holistic Malaysia in Perumal’s mind. I asked him to elaborate on this answer, and he related a story about his childhood.

Growing up in a rural, Tamil, mostly Hindu, village in 1990s northern Malaysia, Perumal recalled the sonic environment of his home: “People would leave their radios on all day, it was

background noise” (personal communication, March 25, 2015). He explained that the Radio Television Malaysia (RTM) government-sponsored programming flowed seamlessly from Hindu devotional music to Islamic programming. The Islamic programs included religious music, such as that of the popular genre known as *nasyid*, or programs featuring religious talks, such as what is referred to in Malay as a *peringatan* (reminder), by a popular *ustaz* (an Islamic teacher).

Perumal recalled this programming forming a part of his daily soundscape, as people tended to keep the radio on throughout the day, regardless of its content. He said, “[n]o one would give it a second thought” to have Islamic programming blaring throughout this predominantly Hindu village (personal communication, March 28, 2015). This story shows that in his choice to represent the Islamic cultural backdrop of Malaysia in his film through the sound of the *gambus*, the filmmaker conflated the Middle Eastern sound of the *gambus* with Islamic cultural expression in Malaysia in general. While this is an example of semiotic indexing, it leads to thinking about ways in which human and non-human agencies overlap. Specifically, I am referring to the ways in which the sonic qualities of the *gambus* infiltrated Perumal’s subconscious mind as an performative byte transmitting Malaysian cultural identity. This infiltration occurred not only through choices made by radio programmers or individual villagers habitually leaving their radios on, but by the power of soundscapes to form synapses in the brain concerning identity constructs without initial conscious awareness.

During my fieldwork I experienced repeatedly how human and nonhuman agencies overlap in the case of the *gambus*’ powerful performative abilities. An integral part of this human and non-human interplay relies heavily on the physical, material body that is the human brain. As discussed earlier, in the philosophy of vital materialism, agency is a slippery concept. When deconstructed, conscious human intent becomes one of many agentic forces in a heterogeneous

field. In Bennett's conception, borrowing from Latour, she attempts to "raise the volume on materiality" by depicting nonhuman bodies "as actants rather than as objects" (10). I suggest that the subconscious, mechanistic—though "vital" in Bennett's sense—processes of the human brain are actants in ways that move beyond how conscious, human agency is typically privileged, or taken for granted, in scholarship.

Music psychologists have found that the brain's recognition of certain features such as timbre occur within the first 250 milliseconds of hearing the sound (Huron 2006:208). This suggests that tying timbral cues to identity categories occurs at a subconscious level, unlike other, more time-consuming and consciously learned processes such as identifying the difference between large-scale musical forms. Part of the reason for this quick identification of sound quality has to do with the basic evolution of the brain as being wired for survival. There are many types of sounds in the world and it is important to know not only from where a sound is coming, and quickly, but also to recognize the type of sound, as the sound of a dangerous tiger is much different and much more threatening than the sound of a harmless bird. Brain structures are thus organized hierarchically, as some processes are more consciously learned, while others happen at the subconscious and innate levels. Neuroscientists have found that "[h]ierarchical structures play a central role in many aspects of human cognition, prominently including both language and music" (Martins et al 2014:300). Much of this has to do with the way the brain has evolved through the ages.

Relying on cognitive science to understand the ways in which the brain processes sounds, even if at the most basic level of understanding, is useful because it reveals that musical characteristics are powerful identity signifiers not only thanks to conscious learning, but are applied to identity categories based on subconsciously acculturated schemas, many of which rely

on material agentic forces in the world. These types of revelations come directly from the vital materialist approach that moves beyond solely privileging direct, human intention, but instead widens the gaze to the more mechanistic processes of the brain as material object/actant.

### **The Driving Power of Oral Agency**

Ethnomusicologists have long emphasized the importance of language as a powerful component in the process of constructing a cultural tradition. One ubiquitous example drawn widely from any part of the world that incorporates commercialism into music recording is how in the 21st century, digital musical recordings are still referred to as “albums,” and thus implying a material component. The way we speak about music, its orality, is inextricably bound with a kind of material agency, exerting what I have called a positive, driving agency, one reinforced and reconstructed through language. It is common throughout the world to use words that are materially grounded as metaphors for musical language such as form and genre, for example, in referring to the main melody of a piece as the “head.”

These descriptions are also used in Malay musical genres, terms usually borrowed from the syncretic influences from which these genres draw. One relevant example involves the Hadhrami-derived dance genre known as *zapin*. The final cadence to a *zapin* piece is sometimes referred to as *tahtim*, which in Arabic means “to physically break apart,” thus serving as a metaphor for a cadence, or coda that breaks away from the piece (Anis 1993). Another example is the name of the Malay court ensemble known as *nobat*, which is a combination of the Sanskrit words *nau* (“vessel”), *navan* (“nine”), and *bah* (“to grow, combine”), referring to the physical vessel, or ensemble that combines nine instruments to form the instrumentation for the genre. Historically in Malay musical genres, plucked instrumentalists, such as mandolin and *gambus* players, typically play a fast tremolo that is viewed as transcending the tempo of the piece. As

the *gambus* musician Azrin Abdullah explained, this technique is referred to as *melatah*, which means “to startle” in Malay, and thus references the involuntary physical response to such a musical technique (personal communication, 31 March 2017).

My point is not to outline each example of how physical metaphors are used in descriptions of Malay music, but to show how oral descriptions become agentic and forceful as they combine with wider meanings to communicate value. In other words, by paying close attention to the smallest qualitative components of agency, the power behind these units of meaning, or bytes, becomes knowable.

The *gambus* in Malay music traditions is bound up with the human body in many ways. One of the most important ways in which this occurs is with its connection to the voice. As I mention in chapter 2, Pak Norihan constantly referenced the importance of vocalists in his *gambus* lessons. Early on in our meetings, he introduced me to the history of the singer, S.A. Aishah, a highly revered vocalist in Malay music history. S.A. Aishah was the matriarch of the famous Johorian family *ghazal* group in the 1970s and 80s, known as *Seri Penambang* (personal communication with Pak Norihan, 5 March 2015). Norihan told me that many of her descendants still perform today, many of whom are employed by government-funded institutions such as *Dewan Bandaraya* (City Hall) and *Istana Budaya* in Kuala Lumpur. These institutions hire musicians to play in their official house bands, the purpose of which is to transmit Malaysian cultural heritage, which typically heavily foregrounds a Malay component of this national identity. While he mentioned these living musicians as important, they were only peripheral in our discussions, despite the fact that our focus was the *gambus*, a musical instrument.

While there are several parallel examples of female vocalists holding a high status in the Islamicate world, for example, Umm Kulthum in Egypt, or Fairuz in Lebanon, historically

female vocalists have been more disdained than revered, at least when considering the Islamicate world outside of Southeast Asia. This same trend can be traced in Southeast Asia, for example, amongst the *pesindhen* (female vocalists) in Javanese *gamelan*, sometimes compared to prostitutes (Walton 1996). Anthropologist Michael Peletz notes that the history of gender relations amongst Malays in Malaysia is more nuanced than the recent mirroring of Arab Islamic gender relations, one that values the male as patriarch over and above female social roles (1994). Throughout history, various Malay communities have placed high value on the matriarch.

When responding to why these female vocalists were so revered, Pak Norihan pointed to neither the Islamicate world nor the history of Malay gender relations. When I asked him about this phenomenon, he told me that it was a coincidence, and that these women happened to be master vocalists. He was also quick to assure me that there were also skilled male vocalists, for example, S.M. Salim, who was prominent as a singer of Malay songs (*lagu lagu Melayu*) in the 1970s. When I pressed him further about why he chose to particularly highlight the women, he submitted that it was well known amongst Malays that women are good singers (personal communication, 26 May 2016). However, he insisted that the voice itself was the important component, not the gender (*ibid.*). Thus, the human body as a material object took precedence in his mind.

### **The Voice as Performative Transmission Byte**

In our discussions, it became clear that to Pak Norihan, the symbolic power of the *gambus* lied in its connection to the human voice. He implored, “[y]ou must learn to sing if you want to learn to play,” which is a common observation in many musical traditions the world over (personal communication, 14 May 2015). While Norihan was a *gambus* player and teacher, not surprisingly, he was also a singer. When teaching *ghazal* and other Malay musical genres, he

emphasized the importance of the song as a sung piece, the important components of which included the lyrics and the melodic embellishments (*bunga*). While discussing the history of the music, he noted important vocalists over and above instrumentalists, which made me wonder about the relationship between the *gambus* and singing. Thus, I found that the voice was highly revered in Malay traditions. Acting as a performative transmission byte, the vocal aesthetic was performed/enunciated through the *gambus* as a site of this transmission.

This sentiment was echoed in my fieldwork by another *gambus* player, Azrin Abdullah, a Singaporean Malay I encountered frequently at various music-related events (*majlis*) in and around KL. In our discussions I learned that we were both guitarists, but that he switched to the *gambus* years ago. In a more recent communication I asked him why he switched to *gambus* from guitar and he replied simply, “The guitar doesn’t ‘sing’ like the *oud* [*gambus*]” (personal communication 14 March 2017). Many Malaysian *gambus* musicians discussed the melismatic quality of the fretless *gambus* as preferable to the fretted guitar. Much of this preference had to do with the way the *gambus* could render a melody. Kamal Sabran, founder of the IEAS, said, “[*gambus* can talk better than guitar,” another reference to the expressive qualities of the fretless instrument (personal communication, 26 March 2015). While he didn’t mention “singing,” but instead “talking,” I imagine this had much to do with the fact that he does not consider himself a musician, but a “noisician.” This distinction was important to his experimental music practice that he viewed as freed from form, melody, and other “rules” of music (personal communication, 26 March 2015). Thus, to me, he expressed a similar sentiment of viewing *gambus* as an important expressive tool, as the voice is also important in Malay traditions.

Raja Zul is not a singer, but he too imparted the importance of melody and the *gambus*’ unique ability to render melismatic melodies. It has been documented that in India the lack of the

success of the fretted guitar in classical genres is owed to the fact that it houses frets that can limit melismatic sounds (Clayton 2001:15). Ethnomusicologist Andre Elías argues that the Indian slide guitar—despite the fact that it is still fretted, much like many Indian lutes—is much more successful in these genres due to its ability to produce melismatic effects, i.e., to “sing” (Elías 2016). The *gambus* functioned similarly in Malaysia as a way to communicate the orality of Malay and Middle Eastern tunes without the voice. This is especially interesting given that most Malay musical traditions are rooted in the use of frame percussion and distinguished by various dance rhythms. I suggest that the *gambus* players I met switched from fretted guitar to the *gambus* because the *gambus* is a more natural choice as a fretless lute, because it “sings” and embodies a history and iconicity that connects Malaysia to a wider Islamicate world.

In the previous chapter I discuss the ideological battles over *gambus* pedagogy. The performance of the *gambus* at all can also be a contentious issue in Islamic politics. I found that the voice acts as a performative transmission byte to raise the status of the *gambus* as a symbol of Malay identity. The conservative Islamic political party in Malaysia, known as *Parti Islam seMalaysia* (PAS), has advised that only the voice and percussion instruments are permissible in Islam, a widespread belief historically amongst Islamic cultures (Dijk 2001:312). In other words, these instruments are “halal,” accepted in Islam above the distractions that other types of musical performance can render, citing a handful of the *hadith* (sayings of the Prophet) that are reported to have warned against music making with too many different kinds of instruments (Khabeer 2007:139). While it is not illegal in Malaysia to perform music on instruments other than the voice or percussion, nor is it illegal in the *Syariah* courts, this stance nevertheless looms large in the popular imagination of Malay musicians. By comparing the *gambus* to the human voice, Pak Norihan thus elevated or justified the status of the *gambus* in Malay traditions through the

performative byte that is the human voice. This is one of many indices drawn, including situating the *gambus* within the wider realm of Islamicate performing arts in parts of the world where lute music is lauded and respected, that elevate the role of the *gambus* as a transmitter of Malay cultural heritage and values.

### **Incidental Agency Governing Identity Performance**

When I first noticed that while the *gambus* and *oud* are completely different instruments in places such as Yemen, but conflated in Malaysia, I thought about the reasons why. I noticed that many *gambus* players actually only performed on the Middle Eastern *oud*. I initially thought this was a deliberate way to connect Malay traditions with a more iconic representative of the Islamicate world while retaining a linguistic connection to older Malay traditions influenced by Hadhrami culture, which is also Arab and even more ancient. However, as I mention previously, the *oud* is more iconic of a modern pan-Middle Eastern Islamicate sound. While this interpretation is accurate in countless ways, I believe there might be other, incidental forces at work that are tempting to ignore unless the agentic lens is expanded.

When I first noticed that the Egyptian and Turkish *ouds* were replacing the Malay *gambus*, I assumed it was because of semiotics and the conflation of Islam, Malayness, and Islamic cultures of the Middle East. However, by applying a vital materialist interpretation, a host of new agentic forces were uncovered, not least of which had to do with the basic materials that are used to construct the *oud*. Deforestation in Malaysia has been an issue since the logging industry boom of the 1950s and 60s. Forest and woodlands have steadily dwindled since the 1970s (Barraclough and Ghimire 2000:11). Furthermore, the move towards a more technologically-oriented versus raw materials export economy has contributed to the lack of a full-fledged musical instrument production industry in the region. While I was in KL, the

demand existed for plucked lutes in Malaysia, and the Turkish and Egyptian *ouds* were widely available for import thanks largely to the internet.

Even without considering the availability of raw materials, there is evidence that the relatively prosperous Malaysian economy contributes to the dwindling of instrument production. Many of the *gambus* makers I met in rural areas of Malaysia were aging, thus fewer instruments were available than in the past. Malaysia is often cited as a quintessential example of post-World War II export-led economic growth (Barraclough and Ghimire 2000:111). With this economic expansion came the expansion of many industries. New industries, such as those in technology, created career opportunities that many young Malaysians could not ignore. Thus, would-be *gambus* making apprentices were drawn to urban areas seeking gainful employment.

In the previous chapter I discuss ways that some of the local *gambus* makers privilege the visual component of the instrument over its quality. Raja Zul blames this on the fact that the makers does not “know the *gambus* inside [and] out” the way they do in the Middle East (personal communication 13 October 2017). Much of this could also be attributed to the environmental and economic factors mentioned above. Raja Zul and his students are aware of this gap in playability and thus are drawn to the imported *ouds* over even the oud-style instruments in Malaysia. Even worse for the case of the Hadhrami style lutes, the imported *ouds* are not only better quality instruments but have a wider pitch range and are usually fitted with more strings, which is appealing to musicians in KL.

I draw on these examples to show that agentic forces overlap and that incidental agentic factors sometimes govern identity transmission beyond and combined with the intentions of individual musicians. The most important agentic force tied to human activity is an anthropomorphic kind of agency that is perceived by humans as applied to objects in the world.

These anthropomorphic kinds of agency are interesting because they reveal instances where humans fail to explain certain agentic forces. Thus, their only recourse is to assign human agency to objects in order to understand their phenomena

### **Anthropomorphism**

This section highlights the ways that agencies overlap, from non-human to human and back again. While things seem to have a force all their own, coming alive independently of human agency, it is often anthropomorphism that keeps them alive, making them extensions of selves and material bodies. Bennett suggests that “we need to cultivate a bit of anthropomorphism—the idea that human agency has some echoes in nonhuman nature—to counter the narcissism of humans in charge of the world” (2010:xvi). In this section I work to locate the agency of musical instruments, revealing their power to transmit cultural identity information. This is a power that so often eludes human understanding, and thus is interesting in my work. Through a special focus on anthropomorphic and perceived agency, it is possible to discover where different types of human and nonhuman agencies meet. In turn, new opportunities are gained in widening the understanding of cultural contexts from which these overlapping agencies operate.

Bennett argues that when we deconstruct agency, it is next to impossible, if not impossible to gain a full understanding of its forces. In other words these forces are largely immeasurable (2010:76). By examining works ranging from Kant to Latour, she shows that agency is not as clear-cut as our anthropocentric hubris seems to tell us, and that scholars have yet to satisfactorily answer questions concerning where mechanistic materiality ends and vibrant agency begins. She reminds that even Darwin, a committed naturalist, thought that

anthropomorphism was key in accessing this gap (2010:99). Discussing her methodology she writes:

In a vital materialism, an anthropomorphic element in perception can uncover a whole world of resonances and resemblances—sounds and sights that echo and bounce far more than would be possible were the universe to have a hierarchical structure. We at first may see only a world in our own image, but what appears next is a swarm of ‘talented’ and vibrant materialities (including the seeing self) (ibid.).

I found that individuals frequently treated instruments in this way, as talented individuals with vibrant materialities.

While discussing the difference between a Turkish imported *oud* and a Malaysian *gambus/oud*, one musician, Naja, said the Turkish *oud* could “play itself” (personal communication, 21 April 2015). This comment was not an isolated incident, where prestige and talent were attributed to the instrument itself. Raja Zul complained that while the quality of the Middle Eastern *ouds* was high, the woods “did not know how to react” to the tropical climate (personal communication 29 April 2015). Thus, in the example of the Malaysian *gambus* prototype, which I mention in the previous chapter, the Malaysian woods literally linked the Turkish and Malaysian environment, imbuing the *oud* with a power that was more than the sum of its parts. In meetings at the National Museum, I constantly heard administrators and curators asking Raja Zul, “How is the prototype?” (*Bagaimana prototaip?*) or “When will he/she arrive?” (*Bila akan dia datang?*), as if an esteemed guest was about to visit.<sup>15</sup>

In his book, *Art and Agency* (1998), anthropologist Alfred Gell insists that we take the anthropomorphic agency of objects seriously. He references the seemingly trivial example of a little girl and her doll. At one point in the child’s life this doll is their best friend, literally. If

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<sup>15</sup> The “he/she” translation is rendered because pronouns are not gender specific in Malay.

either their doll or little brother had to depart the proverbial lifeboat in order to stop it from sinking, Gell suspects that the child would likely choose to save the doll. He then makes the apt comparison to such important art works as Michelangelo's *David*, asking, “What is *David* if not a big doll for grownups?” (1998:18). The point is that objects become anthropomorphized, elevating their agentic status, if not independently of human agency, at least supervenient of individual agency, and certainly, as we learn from cognitive science, mapped in the physicality of the human brain as such (Cardinali et al 2009).

Thus, when Pak Norihan told me to treat my *gambus* and lesson materials “like the Qur’an,” I was not surprised, nor did I take such statements lightly. This statement illustrates the power imbued in the materiality of the *gambus* and the way it aligned with the powerful values of Islamic identity. For Pak Norihan, the materials with which he worked, with which he bore his cultural heritage, and through which he passed on vital knowledge about Malay culture, were as important as the humans that expressed through these materials. He considered these materials to wield power in the way that humans wield power in transmitting identity. Acknowledging such agency has real implications for the value placed on the human lives involved in the transmission of expressive culture, let alone the material media through which and with which they work.

Another example of the importance of the instrument as an agentic force comes from observations I made studying with my main teacher, Raja Zul. When I noticed Zul light heartedly, though frequently, claiming that he has “OCOD (Obsessive Compulsive Oud Disorder),” I decided to pay attention to his relationship with his instruments. The owner of over ten *ouds* since the year 2000, he treats each one as an individual with its own personality. He explained to me that different instruments have different “personalities” and that each is suited for a different performance context (personal communication, October 19, 2015).

During my time studying the *gambus* in Malaysia, I experienced the charisma emanating from my own instrument. When I was recording music for the soundtrack of *Jagat* with the IEAS, I remember Kamal saying on multiple occasions, “[l]et’s hear what Farouk has to say,” referring to my *oud* (personal communication, 3 April 2015). Little jokes such as this reinforced the importance of material agency in musical expression. Another example of this kind of joking occurred when Kamal referred to my Farouk Turunz *oud* as “Farouk Naik,” which is a reference to the Malay word, *naik*, which means “to ascend,” as opposed to *turun*, which means “to descend.”

Another way that this human-like charisma manifested through my instrument occurred as I travelled around Malaysia with Raja Zul. He often warned me that “[p]eople will want to touch your *oud*, so be careful,” knowing that such a nice instrument would be the life of any gathering of musicians, capable of upstaging even the most compelling human in the room. While I initially thought about the monetary value and fine construction by Farouk Turunz in understanding this statement, I soon realized he was applying more of an anthropomorphic agency to the *oud* beyond it simply being a nice instrument. He would often speak of the aroma of the instrument’s wood as having the ability to attract a player. I also heard musicians making comments such as, “the *oud* chose *me*” instead of the individual choosing to play the *oud*. The instrument and its player was a special relationship between two persons.

Labeling the parts of the *gambus* in Malaysia also took on a decidedly anthropomorphic character, which when looked at in the right way, reveals the potency of an instrument’s own agency. As shown in Figure 24, each part of the *gambus* is named after a body part of an animal or human being, for example the tuning pegs labeled as “ears.” While the Malay language borrows heavily from myriad linguistic influences, adding new words to its vocabulary as

relevant, it does so with efficiency. In other words, when already-adopted vocabulary exists, it is used, taking the path of least resistance and complexity to communicate meaning. In the case of the *gambus*, it shows how naming conventions fall to anthropomorphic characteristics, defaulting to the most obvious and immediate materialism to the namer—the body. Therefore, Malays are accustomed to thinking about the *gambus* and other objects in anthropomorphic terms. However, this proclivity for privileging anthropomorphic characteristics is echoed in naming conventions of Western instruments as well, for example, a guitar “neck.” Thus, not only does this phenomenon reflect a Malay proclivity, but a human one, though nonetheless interesting and relevant in the Malay context.

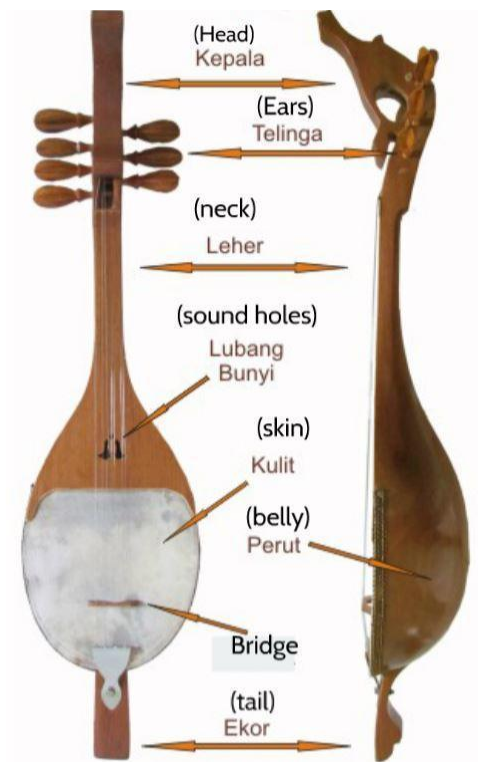


Figure 24: *Gambus Melayu* with typical anthropomorphic labels. 2017. Image courtesy of Tengku Firdaus Alsahab.

### **“Be a Driver”: Taking Back Agentic Reins.**

The usefulness of highlighting the three aforementioned types of agency is to theoretically point to a number of salient ways in which humans interact and negotiate with forms of agency, both real and imagined, explicable and inexplicable. The world of symbols and the symbolic ecology is vast and exerts agency on identity and meaning beyond individual human control. Thus, there is an impetus to understand agency in terms of its understandable positive and negative forces, or by metaphorically asserting control through strategies such as anthropomorphism. As I mention, Malay musical traditions are historically taught by rote, oral transmission. In institutions such as ASWARA, teachers accustomed to this oral transmission feel somewhat threatened by those who advocate for a classical theory oriented approach to learning—including Western and Middle Eastern music theory models. At ASWARA, I understood teachers such as Pak Norihan and Pak Yassin responding to this push for a modernized approach to transmission as its own kind of agency, which challenged their ability to transmit cultural heritage. These teachers referred to the oral transmission method not as a lack of understanding and intellectual rigor, but as an empowered, human controlled approach to music transmission, one where the musicians assumed the agentic reins of how traditions were transmitted and taught.

During an early memorable *ghazal* class that I attended at ASWARA, Pak Norihan told the students to “[b]e a driver” (27 April 2015). In other words, he suggested students assert control over their own musical transmission process. Students at ASWARA are required to learn Western notation during their first year of coursework at the institution. When learning new songs in traditional genres, as I saw in multiple ensemble classes from *asli* to *ghazal*, many of the students used sheet music as a guide. When I asked Pak Norihan what he thought about this,

he explained that he never learned to read music, and that he teaches the students in the same way that he himself learned, by rote. He reiterated, “I tell them to be a driver, not a passenger” (personal communication, 28 May 2015). To me this is both an example of different types of human-created agency vying for power in this academic setting and a metaphor to retain control over the human and nonhuman agentic forces guiding musical practice that draws from a vast symbolic ecology in its transmission.

In Norihan’s conception, when students struggled to capture the essence of a song, the fixed sheet music was doing all the driving. In other words, the agency was transferred to the material presence of the notation. While *ghazal* forms are fairly simple in terms of functional harmony, the complexity comes from improvised ornamentation and countermelodies (*bunga*). Reactive and sensitive musicianship is required to tap into the vitality of the piece. Thus, another kind of driver is the inexplicable *bunga* itself. This idea is comparable to ethnomusicologist Marc Perlman’s description of “unplayed” melodies in *gamelan* pieces partially reflecting an allusive Javanese etiquette (2004:160). After talking to *zapin* dancers at ASWARA, I realized that much of the aesthetic value system in Malay arts is conceptualized as understatement. This understatement is reflected in the music as well. As I describe in Chapter 2, musicians often talked of *lemah lembut* (“gentle”) as a way to describe a Malay aesthetic value that extends into areas of social etiquette, like the Javanese example. In this way, the sheet music is not the only driver. There are inexplicable agentic qualities encapsulated under the term *bunga* (lit. “flower;” embellishment). This force should be allowed to exert some control, but the musicians must guide the main melody by using countermelodies to “dance around” the main melody.<sup>16</sup> There is a recalcitrant force in the limits of individual instruments, i.e., the positive agency acting on

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<sup>16</sup> I learned this from multiple musicians over the course of my fieldwork and cannot attribute the quote to a specific individual.

musicians, and is channeled through the maturity and skill of the musician to react “gently” to the driving agency of implicit melodies.<sup>17</sup>

I found traces all three forms of agency described in this chapter bound up in the concept of *bunga*, which I introduce in Chapter 2. Since Norihan told all his students to be a driver, and not a passenger, this gives an anthropomorphic will to the inexplicable and holistic components of melody, rhythm, timbre, and human physical reaction, such as nodding and shouting phrases—e.g., “*wahai*,” an exclamation like “oh!” All these elements are contained in the allusive piece of music that is only transmitted by rote performance. There is always a positive, driving agency left to characteristics such as *bunga*, those that drive on their own. There is so much stock placed in this transmission process that outside theoretical elements (both Western and Islamicate), to certain teachers in the *adat Melayu* camp, are threatened by the agency of encroaching, seemingly discursive and literal theories. These encroaching theories are viewed by some as a recalcitrant breakdown of tradition, while others see it as elevating it, something I describe previously in this dissertation.

Norihan showed the students how to be the driver, that is, how to not only reclaim, but also work with the agency in how the piece unfolded. Throughout this section, I have shown that when agency was treated as heterogeneous and extending beyond the human, a great deal can be learned about the transmission of expressive culture. This approach does not devalue the human input, but instead raises other agentic forces to the human level, thus lending to a more nuanced understanding of the field.

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<sup>17</sup> Perlman (2004) discusses implicit melodies as sometimes never stated in Javanese *gamelan*. The Malay songs differ in this regard in that the melodies are usually explicit in the vocal line, but the instrumental lines react to it through countermelodies and *bunga*.

In my argument for expanding approaches to agency, I outline new ways to gain a fuller understanding of expressive cultural transmission in its various agentic forms. In order to better understand “what is really going on here” (Malinowski 1922), and to take Geertz’ (1973) call for “thick description” seriously, my approach gives close attention to materials in the field. These materials, as with musical instruments, are tools with which humans articulate socio-political narratives in a performative context.

## Chapter 5: Articulating Islam, Race, and Gender Narratives

This chapter examines modes of praxis, or norms and standards of identity performance, as they manifest in *gambus* transmission. I investigate what can be learned about identity when the boundaries of these norms and standards are tested through performance. The identity narratives covered in this chapter are organized according to the themes of Islamic, racial, and gender norms in urban *gambus* transmission. As I describe these themes and the ways in which they are enacted through their transmission in urban Malaysia, I will highlight ruptures in identity praxes that are revealed in *gambus* transmission. I argue that these points of rupture give expressivity to previously silent narratives regarding Malay identity and its others, including non-Malays, non-Muslims, and other identities that fall outside the fold of Malayness.

The dominant identity praxis concerning urban Malays stems from the pervasive New Economic Plan (1970-1990) and former Prime Minister Mahathir's developmental slogan, "Malaysia Boleh!" or "Malaysia Can!" which characterized the 1990s. During this time, Mahathir particularly encouraged mostly young Malay men to move into the urban areas to contribute to Malaysia's developmental goals while pursuing personal economic success. Southeast Asianist scholar Gaik Cheng Khoo suggests that these dominant forces on new Malay identity created a kind of Foucauldian self-policing panopticon amongst Malays (2010:306).<sup>18</sup> The dominant praxes in this panopticon essentialize and encourage the Malay to be both a good Muslim and economically independent, which leads to identity crises when these conditions cannot be met. This chapter examines some of these anxieties as they manifest in *gambus*

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<sup>18</sup> Khoo analyzes this panopticon in reference to two Malaysian films. She acknowledges the somewhat essentialist nature of this racial analysis, but the filmmakers chose Malay identity politics as the presiding theme. I would also point out that these identity categories are dominant and pervasive in the Malaysian social imagination as well, precisely because the governmental assertion of these categories is also essentialist in nature.

transmission and how this transmission both reveals and reinvents dominant Malay identities and its Others.

Influenced by feminist theorists, such as Judith Butler, this discussion involves the micropolitics of music transmission that reveal ways in which cultural practices “naturalize” identity categories (1990). These approaches are influenced by social theorist Michel Foucault’s work on the human body and its social constructivism (1976). The ruptures I reveal in naturalized praxes of Malay identity occur through a recalcitrance in identity transmission, including a material recalcitrance (Bennett 2010:1). All identity concepts have a material basis—or at least an imagined one. In the case of gender and ethnic identity, this imagined materiality is usually biological. This basis in materiality also lends to the social power of naturalizing identity categories, i.e., appealing to the physical world has the appearance of a fixed reality. Yet the permanent nature of these materialities is overemphasized by the collective imagination. At base, these materialities are fluid and evolving, emitting a recalcitrant force that affects the stability of naturalized identity constructs. This recalcitrance disrupts and redirects agentic trajectories in identity formation. The fluidity of musical performance through a powerful symbol such as the *gambus* provides a platform to examine the micropolitics of these identity negotiations.

As I have discussed in previous chapters, Malaysia is a society where identity categories are taken particularly seriously, especially with regard to Malay Muslim identity. This austerity is evidenced by the organization of Malaysian political parties by race and the privileging of Muslim identity in the Malaysian Constitution. When these identity narratives are disrupted, I argue that this tension reveals the shape of identity praxes while at the same time revealing their fragility and recalcitrance. The extent of identity knowledge is revealed in exploring the imagined, discursive, and incidental limitations and contingencies of such knowledge. The

examples of *gambus* transmission outlined in this chapter test the limits of norms and standards in identity formation. This approach entails "an analysis of the conditions under which certain relations of subject and object are formed or modified" thus leading to an understanding of the conditions comprising a "possible knowledge" revealed through its contingent understandings (Foucault cited in Miller 1994:138). Possible, imagined, and collectively understood identity formations are revealed negatively through action that is considered unacceptable in a given identity praxis. In other words, the shape of an identity praxis is revealed and reshaped through instances where practice—performative enactment—conflicts with an understood, albeit flexible and abstract, "theory" of identity.

Since identity concepts are usually, if not always, understood in relation to difference (cf. Said 1979, Anderson 1991), ruptures are all the more *disruptive*, revealing tensions and agentic forces in the transmission of cultural identity. Geographer Tim Cresswell refers to the disruption of norms in his study of film "as an indicator and diagnostic of power" in normative praxes (2002:258; also cited in Bunnell 2002:1687). While I am arguing that these points of rupture reveal forces behind identity construction, I am not suggesting that all of these points of rupture are necessarily transgressive, nor am I necessarily arguing that praxes are completely built on oppressive power structures—due to their constant performative reinvention—as these terms imply intentionality. Instead, I examine the larger scope of identity work that includes human intentionality and incidental signification, including but not limited to agentic forces on both sides of the political spectrum of power and subversion. All of these forces make up the symbolic ecology that is the larger focus of this dissertation.

In chapter 3, I discuss ways that performative events (*majlis*) display specific tellings of Malay heritage. The manifestation of Malay identity within a *majlis* reveals competing

performative modes of Malayness. Philosopher Theodor Adorno discusses what he calls a “canon of prohibitions” that emerges when arts become co-opted, codified, and standardized in particular classicized traditions, which “reflect very personal, very idiosyncratic aversions of artists; once publicly stated, they can become binding and valid for others” (1984:53). Prior to these “aesthetic procedures” becoming publicly stated and universalized, these “pre-theoretical aversions are sedimentations of collective modes of behaviour” (ibid.). Once these aversions are stated, theorized, and universalized, artists then often “self-negate” in order to create new idiosyncratic expression to the point where “art is an allergic reaction against art” (ibid.). In other words, the process of canonization, not only at the level of repertoire, but at each level of aesthetic standardization is a process of stating aversions in art, that is, what is not valued by a collective. The canon is glaring in its omissions and reveals what is valued in a society. The *majlis* is a place where such collective aversions are articulated, and usually reactionary in nature. This chapter discusses ways that disruptions in standards of identity performance both reinforce and reinvent solidified understandings of Malay identity through *gambus* transmission processes.

Anthropologist Joel Kahn writes about how disparate forms of Malaysian pop culture reveal a diversity of global influences, yet remain silent about their others—i.e., non-Malay/non-Muslim Malaysians (2003:159). *Gambus* transmission also contains silent narratives of religious, racial, and gender subjects. I argue that individuals who must compensate for their otherness express these previously silent narratives concerning what is and is not a normative part of an identity praxis. This compensation reveals a rupture in the praxis, one that further reveals the trajectory of an identity transmission praxis more vividly. In the pages that follow I outline several ethnographic examples that support the thesis revolving around identity praxis and its

others, revealing ways in which individuals disrupt a praxis of identity by adding previously silent layers to the dominant identity models active within musico-cultural transmission of the *gambus*. In exploring Islamization, race, and gender in *gambus* transmission, I reveal the wider identity politics at work in urban Malaysia. I suggest that such conceptual platforms—for example, institutional cultural exhibitions—are liminoid spaces that reveal the seams of cultural praxes by drawing on and disrupting components of the symbolic ecology through performative transmission bytes.

### **Pushing Boundaries From Outside and Within a Dominant Praxis**

The following is an example from a recent Malaysian pop cultural phenomenon. While it does not involve the *gambus*, it introduces many of the concepts operative within this chapter and within *gambus* transmission. On 21 August 2016, the controversial Chinese Malaysian rapper known as Namewee was arrested under sedition laws by Malaysian police for “insulting Islam” in his new video featuring the song, “Oh My God!” (*The Star*, 2016). The video was shot at various places of worship throughout the island side of Penang state off the west coast of Peninsular Malaysia, places that included temples, churches, and mosques. Since all of these symbols are strong performative bytes with well-worn identity formations guiding their agentic formation, the collision of these bytes confused people, evoking a sense of skepticism and fear. Also featured in the song was the use of the name, “Allah,” along with other religious names. Namewee claimed that the video and song were produced with the purpose of “promoting religious harmony” (*ibid.*). However, when Islam is represented by a non-Muslim, however peacefully, the video is at risk of stirring controversy or even precipitating legal consequences.

While exploring Namewee's Youtube presence, I came across a video that was shot prior to this most recent incident where he interviews Malay rapper Edly Mohammad Firdaus.<sup>19</sup> They spend the length of the video discussing racial politics in Malaysia, citing ways that racial categories are misunderstood in Malaysia. Edly grew up attending a Chinese-majority school and thus speaks and understands Mandarin Chinese. He discusses how some Chinese are "shocked" to hear him speak their language. This interracial performativity is unexpected from a Malay, and thus is promoted in the video as an example of the ways in which identity categories in Malaysia act as barriers to understanding. Throughout the video the two artists continue to list stereotypes that the "ordinary" Chinese person believes about Malays and vice versa. Edly states that most of the stereotypes do not reflect a lack of respect, but are based on misunderstanding.

In response to some of the misconceptions of Islam by non-Malays, Namewee asks why Malays do not try to reduce misunderstanding, for example, by going door to door in the way that Evangelist Christians proselytize their faith. Edly admits, "I don't know, maybe they too do not really understand Islam" (*Tak tahu lah, mungkin mereka pun tak faham Islam sangat*). To suggest that Malays do not really understand Islam could well be considered an insult to Islam, and thus carry similar repercussions to Namewee's "insult." While there are no doubt examples of Malay Muslims getting into trouble by the Islamic police and/or Malaysian police (citing sedition laws) for insulting Islam, I suspect that Edly does not find himself caught up in controversy, despite continuing to support Namewee and engaging in a cultural critique with him, because he is a Malay Muslim male, and secondly, because he is not a politician and is part of a less explicitly discursive political sphere. Edly is a firm supporter of Namewee, posting videos on his Facebook page while publicly extolling his virtues. While I am only speculating in

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<sup>19</sup> Accessed on Youtube, 13 November 2017 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IJsVdDO2-Dk>>.

this example, I argue that the identity praxis of the Malay male is not scrutinized as heavily—by the government and media—as those “others” who clash with this praxis.

Those, such as Edly, who fall within a majority normative praxis are also able to transcend norms and standards more easily by virtue of their identity, but also by engaging with political spheres—such as arts and social media platforms—that are more loosely defined than, for example, governmental politics. Furthermore, they are less conspicuous in their disruptions of a praxis, unlike the aforementioned “others.” Edly uses the performative bytes that exist within his dominant identity subjectivity to subtly transcend and combine new performative bytes into his Malay male praxis. The disruption here is less conspicuous than those challenges proffered by Namewee, but nonetheless powerful. This particular case reflects a trend I found while conducting ethnographic research in Malaysia, one where a youth arts culture strove to incorporate a more inclusive and less divisive message than Malaysia’s political history presents.

### **Conflicting Praxes in Institutional Contact Zones**

As I mention previously, Raja Zul and Pak Norihan both grew up in rural or semi-rural settings, studying music by rote transmission. While my two teachers’ musical upbringing was similar, their practice and focus as adult teachers in urban Kuala Lumpur differed significantly. They each embodied two broad camps of *gambus* transmission in Malaysia, which I mention in Chapter 2. The first camp practiced and taught the *gambus* as an equal part of a wider complex of orally/aurally transmitted *muzik Melayu*. The second more actively promoted the *gambus* as a unique beacon of Malay culture, one that stood out yet aligned with other musico-cultural spheres. These spheres primarily comprised formally taught musical traditions of both the Western and Arab worlds, including Western scales and functional harmony, and the Arab modal system of *makam*. In most of the cultural institutions I encountered, those outlined in Chapter 1, I

found a wider, but similar dynamic of groups promoting music through various global and local modes of musical praxis, including various Western, Chinese, Indian, Arab, and localized practices that primarily, but not exclusively, have developed within the Malayo-Indonesian Archipelago.

This broader dynamic of colliding cultural spheres of expressive global identity models was especially apparent in the institutions modeled after Western conservatories, such as ASWARA. Thus, I found that much of my research in institutions of musical transmission involved work with what Mary Louise Pratt calls “contact zones,” or “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other” (1991). I have found that institutions of arts transmission in general are placed where ruptures in musico-cultural praxes are defined and reinforced based on various modes of agency, and are thus places where a disruption of the grain of identity construction is uniquely pronounced. I focus my attention on the patterns of three salient processes within the relevant contact zones I study, Islamic, racial, and gender identity. All of these processes were bound up with one another—with the process of Islamization informing the base framework from which the performative transmission of Malay identity occurred.

I view *gambus* lute transmission in institutions such as ASWARA, the National Conservatory for the Arts, and *Istana Budaya* as bound up in a process of elevating Malay cultural forms, contributing to contemporary discourses of Malay exceptionalism that seek to strike a balance with the binaries of East and West, tradition and modernity, urban and rural, secular and religious. In discussing the ongoing political and scholarly debate surrounding Malay exceptionalism and affirmative action in this kind of contemporary discourse, Kahn argues that it is important to not only look at powerful, exemplary figures, such as the writings and speeches of

former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, a primary figurehead in promoting Malay nationalism, but to examine the wider discourses of Malay exceptionalism through popular culture (2003:148).

In his discussion of *nasyid*, a genre of Islamic popular music especially popular amongst Malay youth at the turn of the 21st century, Kahn contrasts this contemporary trend with the imagery found in popular music of decades past, such as the film music of actor and musician P. Ramlee. During the Ramlee era (1940s-70s), Malay identity, while still mapped to an Islamic cultural narrative, was depicted with rural, *kampung*, or “village” imagery (2003:159.). In the contemporary *nasyid* pop phenomenon, Malay identity is notably mapped onto Middle Eastern Islamic imagery through style of dress, dance, gender segregation, and frequent use of Arabic words combined with Malay. Musically, *nasyid* groups also draw heavily from the aesthetics of Western boy and girl band *a capella* groups, yet promote a popular and liberal form of religious devotion (Barendregt 2011:235).

In *nasyid*, while the Western influence is prominent, it is portrayed in contrast to Western pop with its lyrical content promoting wholesome, Islamic values (Barendregt 2011:235). Kahn writes, “[t]he Malays are a community quite literally obsessed with their own uniqueness with respect to a godless, cultureless, but nonetheless imperialist ‘West’” (2003:148). Barendregt notes that while many, as with Kahn, see the popularity of *nasyid* groups in the 21st century as evidence of an emboldened form of Islamization amongst Malay youth, he argues that the most popular groups are reinventing attitudes toward Islam that focus on universal love and inclusion by switching between an array of musical idioms that include *gamelan*, children’s choir, Mandarin pop songs, and contemporary hip hop samples (238). Barendregt shows how *nasyid* groups seek a balance between “East and West, between commercialism and spirituality and

between pop and religion” (251). In the *gambus* transmission practices in KL, Islamic cultural identity was asserted in urban intuitional spaces through secular performance. While aligning Islamic identities with well-worn identity models iconic with Malayness, they also merged with global modern identities that might challenge these normative models.

Many of the students at ASWARA were interested in *pop moden*, or “modern pop,” a loosely defined genre in Malaysia that blends many influences including jazz and rock harmonies, typical big band jazz instrumentation, and often combined with several traditional instruments—such as the two-row gong chime set known as *caklempong*—set to “modern” tunes. During my time participating in and observing lessons, classes, and performances of *gambus* and its related genres, I found that teachers such as Pak Norihan Saif and Pak Yassin Gajal, both at ASWARA, promoted traditional music as an alternative, or important supplement, to the popularity of fusion ensembles such as *pop moden*. When I asked students why traditional music was important to them, several discussed ways in which urban Malaysian culture was moving increasingly towards Western commercialism. Many of these students grew up in rural areas and had come to the city to study music. They overwhelmingly felt that studying traditional music in an urban setting was exciting and contained an aura of success. As college students and professional musicians in city life, they also felt they were doing important work by preserving and continuing the process of traditional culture that they associate with the village and their ancestors, yet with an elevated, “urban(e)” quality (Bunnell 2002).

ASWARA students were required to learn how to read Western notation and to gain at least a basic, pedagogical understanding of Western scales and functional harmony. As I reiterate throughout this thesis, *gambus* transmission in these settings resisted this Western/global pull because it was traditionally taught by rote, and most of its teachers did not read notation.

Furthermore, teachers such as Raja Zul argued that it makes more sense to focus attention not on Western music theory, but on a theoretical tradition from which the *oud/gambus* finds its roots, Middle Eastern music (personal communication, 20 April 2015). While pan-Arab music began utilizing Western notation as an international standard at least as early as the Cairo Congress of 1932, and probably long before in military bands, the modal system differs from Western scales and modes (Gordon 2014:25-27). Thus, teachers who advocate for an increased focus away from explicitly Western modeled pedagogy are not simply reviving a Malay music tradition, since it was traditionally taught by rote, but realigning it with the Islamicate world.

Since Malay performing arts are so syncretic in their history, highlighting the transnational Islamicate characteristics and aligning Malay identity with these characteristics actually becomes a kind of rupture in and of itself, a rupture in the complexity of the Malay performance praxis. Every component of a performance contains the opportunity to disrupt and reconstruct Malay identity. As seen in the photo below, the players in the KL Oriental Ensemble are not wearing traditional Malay attire, thus disrupting expectations revolving around a Malay ensemble (see Figure 25).



Figure 25: Photo accompanying a Facebook post with caption: “‘Oriental Music is our business’ (since 2008) #KLOrientalEnsemble.” 28 February 2015. Photo courtesy of Raja Zulkarnain Raja Yusof.

I suggest that imbuing Malay idioms with Islamicate characteristics enhances Malay cultural expression with symbolic capital. Kahn notes that although Malaysia appears to be increasingly less foreign to Western observers due to globalizing processes, he writes, “the Malay community in Malaysia has developed into a site of a self-exoticizing discourse that, while it has its parallels elsewhere in the world, may be among the supreme cases of ‘othering’ discourses in the modern world” (2003:148). Situating my observations in the well-established scholarly discussions of those such as Said (1979), I refer to this discourse and performativity as self-Orientalizing or self-Arabizing as modes of identity and musical transmission praxes.

### **Connecting with the Islamicate World: Indian Ocean Societies**

In commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the Republic of Sudan’s independence in northern Africa, the Sudanese embassy in Malaysia hosted a Cultural Festival at the Asian Art Museum on the University of Malaya campus in Kuala Lumpur. The promotional booklet reads:

The event showcases the diverse traditions of Sudan and various types of traditional food and drinks. Visitors to the festival, the first of its kind in Malaysia, will experience

Folklore Exhibition, Sudanese Traditional Music Troupe, Coral [sic] by Sudanese students in Malaysia, Musical show, Gallery at Asian Art Museum, Museum Talks about Sudan culture, Sudanese food bazar and kids games, all representing the rich cultural diversity and deep artistic heritage of Sudan.

When I attended this event, I found it interesting that the program included a *gamelan* to welcome the arrival of guests to the exhibition. While I have experienced similar ceremonial *gamelan* performances in Malaysia, especially at university convocation events, I was intrigued that the event would not begin with the promised music of Sudan.<sup>20</sup> Similar peculiarities—i.e. ruptures—seemingly detracting from the event’s focus occurred throughout the event, not least of which was a talk given on “Traditional Musical Instruments: Gambus of Sabah, Malaysia” (event program pamphlet, 27 January 2016). There were two total presentations at the event, only one of which was related to the Sudan.

I was initially surprised to see the *gambus* featured at an event celebrating Sudanese culture. However, this experience resonated with multiple experiences I had in and around KL, where the *gambus* appeared alongside various cultural phenomena found throughout the urbanscape. One example already discussed in Chapter 1 is the national radio broadcast of *gambus* audio clips before each *adhan* (call to prayer). As a performative transmission byte of Malay identity, the *gambus* was folded into an Islamic framework. In previous examples found within this chapter, a Malay identity praxis is disrupted by Middle Eastern and Islamic cultural components, thus voicing new and renewed narratives concerning Malay identity.

In the case of the *adhan*, the *gambus* interrupts a powerful praxis that maps the entire Islamic community (*Ummah*) and asserts Malay identity alongside it. In the case of the Sudanese cultural event, the praxis of Sudanese culture as an autonomous culture is disrupted with a kind

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<sup>20</sup> In chapter 3, I argue that the *gamelan* at ceremonial functions aligns Malay-dominated institutions with a Malay courtly past. I further show how this pillar of Malayness, royalty, is eclipsed by the more relevant Malay pillar in the urban context—Islam.

of reminder concerning its place within Malaysia as another member of the Islamicate cultural world. The *gambus* as a performative byte of both Malay and Islamic identity is positioned within another Islamicate framework, the Sudan, uniting Indian Ocean worlds through liminoid performances. Furthermore, the event was promoted using the ubiquitous Malaysian slogan, “Unity in Diversity” (see Figure 26). This governmental approach to reveal a united Malaysia despite its sectarian conflicts is its own kind of praxis. The *gambus* is folded into the praxis as aligned with another Islamic culture, the Sudan, instead of highlighting non-Muslim Malaysia cultural influences that compete with the Malay Muslim praxis, such as the non-Muslim Indian and Chinese praxes. These performances reveal the seams of dominant praxes, rethreading them into a Malay hegemonic framework and mapping Malay identity once again onto the Islamicate world in new ways. Aligning Malay identity with the Sudan reveals a new component within the symbolic ecology, because in *gambus* transmission the Middle East and Egypt (as representing the entire North Africa) are largely privileged as representatives of the wider transnational Islamicate sphere.



Figure 26: Performers at the 60th Anniversary of Sudanese Independence Celebration held at Universiti Malaya. Note that the sign reads: “UNITY IN DIVERSITY,” which is partially obscured by performers. 27 January 2016. Photo by Joseph Kinzer.

This pairing of Sudanese culture with Malay culture was meant to portray Malaysia as related to Sudanese culture. I learned that the Sudan is mostly known in Malaysia as an Islamic culture despite its diversity. Thus, displaying Sudanese and Malay culture together highlights the theme of a Malaysian “unity in diversity” without needing to reference the many non-Muslim cultural elements of Malaysia. In other words, typically the “unity in diversity” of Malaysia is painted in terms of Chinese, Indian, and Malays. Given the political tension between these groups, I surmise that this event was a way to talk about another kind of Malaysian unity, one existing between Islamicate world expatriates and Malays. Yet certain components of the Sudanese performance were not Islamic in character, including some Christian dances found in Sudan. Thus, I contend that the *gambus* performance was a further rupture that revealed the seams of the Sudan as an Islamicate representative, inserting Islamic identity back into the Sudanese praxis and reinforcing this identity model.

### **The Malay Male Identity Praxis in Gambus Transmission**

The preceding examples show how the *gambus* acts as a performative byte in dominant praxes and their ruptures, revealing ways that Islamic and Malay identity are folded into one another in new and renewed ways. I also found the *gambus* functioning similarly in praxes of gender identity as bound up with Malay identity. Most of my collaborators were Malay males. Within an urban *gambus* transmission praxis, the primary identity model revolves around the Malay male. When someone makes a contribution to musico-cultural transmission from outside certain expected norms and standards, the praxis is highlighted by their otherness and they must in turn lean heavily into unspoken identity components of the praxis. This push and pull of identity negotiation is highly operative in *gambus* transmission.

Anthropologist Eric Thompson discusses a “dissociation in late 20<sup>th</sup>-century Malaysia of what [he calls] the ‘Malay-peasant’ complex” (2003:418). This dissociation creates tensions in the social roles of the Malay male who migrates to urban areas in order to succeed economically. Even though “new Malay” urban identities redefine gender norms, i.e., regarding both male and female in a heterosexual partnership as providers, they still evoke anxieties and tensions. Thompson suggests that in examining new Malay subjectivities of ethnicity, class, religion, gender, and religion in the urban center, that “easy compartmentalizations” should be avoided and suggests examining “points of articulation” between categories. I view ruptures in stereotypical and expected norms and standards as points of articulation where these categories bump up against new urban realities. In turn, these points of articulation highlight the previously embedded identify praxes found in the social fabric, while redefining and challenging these models. As an example, I met one woman from rural Malaysia who pursued *gambus* performance as a career in urban Malaysia, something traditionally pursued by men. In so doing, she redefined the points of articulation between traditional Malay gender models. I argue that to define oneself in contrast to solidified praxes, a person must lean heavily into other dominant formations, such as aspects of Islamicity, while at the same time transcending them.

### **Performing Otherness in a Male-Dominated Identity Praxis**

I first heard Fauziah Suhaili’s (b. 1988) music in 2012 after stumbling across some of her videos on YouTube. In a male-dominated field, she has worked hard since childhood to make a profession out of her passion for *gambus* playing. Originally from Kampung Tengah, a rural village in the Bongawan District in the Bornean/East Malaysian state of Sabah, she moved to Kuala Lumpur in 2010 to pursue a music degree at ASWARA. While she enrolled at ASWARA to round out her musical knowledge, she had been playing *gambus* and singing traditional Malay

songs since she was young. When I met her in person in 2016, along with her husband, Firlany Malik (b.1986), who was also a *gambus* and *qanun* (Arab zither) player, she was shy and unassuming, letting her husband do most of the talking. I interpreted this as a way to allow the traditional gender praxis guide our interaction, while her status as a performer was a rupture in this same praxis. This delicate interplay of identity praxes revealed the contradictions of such praxes in the urban milieu that I experienced repeatedly in fieldwork.

One aspect of our interaction that prompted Fauziah to speak enthusiastically and proudly concerned her musical upbringing. She spoke nostalgically about learning *gambus* from her grandfather, Ismail Mat Usain (b. ?), and uncle, Sulaiman Jabidin, or “Pak Malau” (1941-2016) both of whom were well-known players in Sabah. At first, her grandfather thought of her talent as a novelty, after all, “*gambus* was for the men” (personal communication, 20 January 2016). She described sneaking into her grandfather’s room to play his *gambus* when he was away from the house until eventually one day he caught her practicing. Instead of rebuking her, recognizing her talent and ambition he agreed to teacher her.

As her skills progressed, she became increasingly passionate about the music and wished to participate in the annual *gambus* competition in her village. When she asked her grandfather if she could join, he dismissed the idea reminding, “women do not compete in such things” (ibid.). As a result she was even more driven to compete in this male-dominated competition. To accomplish this goal, Fauziah decided to dress as a boy, tucking her hair into a *songkok*, or traditional Malay male cap, and adorning the traditional male *baju Melayu*, or Malay attire. She entered the competition under the false name, “Fauzi,” which is the male form of Fauziah. Performing well throughout the competition, she won first place. When she was announced as the winner, her grandfather, who was also competing and who she had beaten in the competition,

recognized her face and called out to her. She was revealed to all the participants and attendees as the granddaughter of the great Ismail Mat Usain. Her performance was so impressive that people applauded her efforts, making her grandfather even more proud of her ambition and talent (ibid.).

The above story is an example of a rupture within a Malay male-dominated *gambus* praxis, one where women do not pursue *gambus* as a profession. Fauziah was forced to compensate for her otherness by assuming a male performative role, thus allowing herself to be judged as part of the typical community of musicians. Only after successfully competing as a male was she able to reveal her true, Othered identity. Yet even after this success, her femaleness as a *gambus* player continued to be a novelty. In response, she used her uniqueness to market her concerts, TV and radio appearances, albums, and even ringtones that people can purchase for their smart phones featuring her playing. While the *gambus* community in KL is small, everyone knew Fauziah, also known as “Fauziah *Gambus*.” While this novelty has led to a successful life as a professional musician, the rupture in *gambus* transmission praxis was still apparent in how she negotiated her role as a *gambus* musician within this community, and the way in which this community reacted to her presence and participation.

Before I met Fauziah, I regularly saw her photo featured in promotional materials for ASWARA, which highlighted her success as an alumnus. I remember one of these posters referred to her as “*Gambus* Princess” (*Puteri Gambus*). The reason for this promotion stemmed from her talent, but with many talented students graduating from ASWARA, she particularly stood out as a female *gambus* player. Another poster promoted her as “mysterious,” with her face partially covered (see Figure 27). This imagery marks her as an exotic Other in the typical male praxis, while also aligning with the Islamicate praxis, mirroring the exoticizing imagery often

found in, for example, belly dance practices (Shay and Sellers-Young 2003). As her most recent album cover states, “[There is] only one Fauziah Suhaili,” thus marketing herself as unique in the world of *gambus* performance (see Figure 28). These examples show that as an Other in the male *gambus* praxis, Fauziah must align with other subjectivities in order to successfully participate in the praxis.



Figure 27: Promotional image, which reads: "The Mysterious Side of Fauziah Gambus." 2012. Photo courtesy of Fauziah Suhaili.



Figure 28: Fauziah's most recent album cover, which reads: "Only One Fauziah Suhaili, Gambus Princess." 2016. Photo of album cover taken by Joseph Kinzer.

There is more to unpack when it comes to Fauziah's career development. As I explain above, in order for her to enter the world of *gambus* performance, she felt compelled to merge with the salient identity praxis of the Malay male, and once establishing her credibility, she has leaned heavily into her status as an Other/novel subject. Interestingly, as a Malay female *gambus* musician, I noticed as her career developed she increasingly balanced her status as an Other in this community by performing her piety more prominently. At the start of her career, as an unmarried Malay Muslim woman, she did not wear the *tudung*, or "head covering" that adorns many Malaysian Muslim women. After marriage, she was featured on stage and in promotional materials wearing this headscarf, reflecting a pious female identity model.

When I first began following Fauziah's career in 2012, she actively participated in social media platforms such as Instagram and Twitter. She met her husband, who was a fellow *gambus* musician, while they were both studying at ASWARA. She later appointed him as her manager. He subsequently became her primary public voice, with personal communication to fans increasingly less common on social media platforms, with the exception of posts regarding her personal life, for example, photos of her cat or her baby. Soon after their marriage, Fauziah became a mother and also began wearing the *tudung/hijab* during performances, lending salience to her identity as a pious performer of Malay traditional song, distancing herself from some of the provocative, "mysterious," and Orientalized pop star imagery of her previous years as a performer (see Figure 27 and Figure 28).

Of course, one can imagine a performer of any religious background changing and evolving in their life, focusing on family, personal, and spiritual development. Furthermore, it is not surprising for a performer with increasing success to allow a manager to take over public relations duties. However, regardless of her intent, the performance reads as a pious assertion of

her Malay Muslim identity. I argue that because of Fauziah's constant otherness in this praxis, she Orientalizes/exoticizes herself, though in different ways, throughout her career, constantly balancing herself against the strong pull of the normative identity praxes bound up with *gambus* transmission.

While I show that Fauziah is working against Islamic male identity praxes, she was also one of the few *gambus* musicians I met who was popular on such a large scale. Everyone involved in Malay music knew about Fauziah. Sociologist Charles Hirschman argues that the relative high status of women in pre-colonial Southeast Asia is maintained in post-colonial Peninsular Southeast Asia (2016:47). He suggests that this maintenance is due to the continued participation of females in the economic sector through history and that many family values throughout history have maintained an emphasis on both paternal and maternal lineage (ibid.). While this might generally be the case, I did notice that musicians in KL tended to regard *gambus* transmission as a male practice, similar to the attitude of Fauziah's grandfather as mentioned above. Furthermore, by aligning *gambus* transmission with the Islamicate world, where women performing on stage are less common (though certainly not unheard of), a professional female *gambus* player in Malaysia was highly supported culturally, but nonetheless seen as unique and thus a rupture in previously well-defined praxes. These praxes have worked well for Fauziah's career.

That said, I only met one other female *gambus* player in Malaysia, Fatima. Similar to Fauziah's image transition after marriage, Fatima wore conservative clothing including the *tudung*. When I asked why she was interested in the *gambus*, she said because it was important for her Islamic identity. I did not have the opportunity to discuss much with Fatima, because she was quite shy, similar to the way I perceived Fauziah. Unlike Fauziah, Fatima did not have a

husband as manager. Based on these limited experiences with female *gambus* musicians, I might speculate that because I was male that they were less inclined to speak with me, even in public. However, since most of the *gambus* musicians in KL were male and because I am male, I am not in the position to fully comment on the experiences of female *gambus* musicians. Nonetheless, Fauziah's career is a clear standout in the Malay male *gambus* transmission praxis and has thus illuminated some interesting trends in gender formations within this praxis.

### **Gender Identity and Ghazal Parti**

In Chapter 2 I mention a genre within the Malay music complex that features the *gambus*, a genre known as *ghazal parti*. This section shows that because *gambus* idioms and genres are so aligned with particular versions of Malay identity, such as normative gender identity, when these norms are disrupted through a related genre, they are retold in different ways in the urban setting to better match the hegemonic framework.

*Ghazal parti* is a version of *ghazal* only practiced in small pockets in Penang and Kedah in Peninsular Malaysia. I first learned about this genre from Pak Norihan, who showed me film footage of the practice from his personal archives. However, I was only able to witness one live performance in KL, hosted by the Malaysian Tourism Center (MATIC) and *Jabatan Kebudayaan Negara* (JKKN), the “National Department for Culture and Arts” (JKKN, 29 August 2015). The production was an elaborately-staged *majlis*, a concert with costumed performers, singers, choreographed dancing, a comedian emcee (*pelawak*), and a light show (see Figure 29).



Figure 29: Performers of *ghazal parti* at JKKN. 29 August 2015. Photos by Joseph Kinzer.

The interesting aspect of this production in KL, to me, was comparing it to the film footage. Both productions involved musicians wearing red *fez* caps and featured similar instrumentation, prominently highlighting the sound of the *gambus*. In the video footage, all the songs were sung in Arabic, but this production contained a mix of Malay and Arabic songs. In all of the video footage I watched with Pak Norihan, each performance of *ghazal parti* contained transgender dancers, known as *mak nyah* (see Figure 30). Pak Norihan explained to me that the dancers were a key component of the *ghazal parti* genre, something that separates it from other types of *ghazal* found in Malaysia. However, in the state-sponsored production in KL, there were no *mak nyah* dancers. While the production was framed as a tourist event, most of the audience

was noticeably Malay and local. I was the only Caucasian that I could see in the audience, and perhaps the only non-Malaysian, with only a few non-Malays in attendance.



Figure 30: Screen capture of video footage of the *ghazal parti* band, Ajinda, in Kepala Batas, Penang, Malaysia. Circa 1980s. Footage courtesy Norihan Saif. Screen capture by Joseph Kinzer, 20 November 2017.

The fact that *ghazal parti* is a Malay tradition closely tied to Arab performance, which is conflated with Islam in Malaysia, makes it a contestable performance site. The red *fez* caps, the *gambus* featured as a prominent instrument, and the use of Arabic lyrics by non-Arabic speaking Malays aligns the Malay tradition closely with the wider Islamicate cultural traditions. However, because the status of *mak nyah* dancers—while quite common and naturalized historically—is controversial in contemporary urban Malaysia, their presence is removed during the state-sponsored event/performance. Furthermore, the use of Malay lyrics alongside Arabic positions Malay culture amid a wider Islamicate theme. The presence of the transgender dancers disrupts an urban Islamic Malay praxis, one where transgender performance is forbidden (*haram*), which is not a result of Islam per se, but of a particular Salafist order that has widespread influence throughout the modern Islamicate world.

Though many of the historical *ghazal parti* performances involve Arab Malaysians or Malays with some Arab descent, the performative transmission by of *ghazal parti* is bound up with the Malay music complex. Aligning with Arab identity through the *gambus* is a way to reinforce the dominant Malay identity praxis, but the exclusive use of Arabic language in the *ghazal parti* songs disrupts the urban Malay praxis. Furthermore, the combination of Arab identity with the *mak nyah* dancers conflicts with the kind of symbolic capital used in reinforcing a dominant urban Malay Muslim praxis. Thus, adjustments are made by creating a larger spectacle featuring all female dancers in elaborate costumes. This production not only elevates the tradition in an opulent way, as discussed in Chapter 3, but also draws attention to the all cisgender female dancers.

Cases where the government transforms traditional genres and “sanitizes” them in order to fit with a hegemonic value system is common in Malaysia. The most infamous example comes from the Islamic Party (PAS)-led state of Kelantan, where traditional art forms such as *mak yong* (dance) (not to be confused with *mak nyah*) and *wayang kulit Kelantan* (shadow puppet theatre) were banned in the 1990s. These forms were only recently allowed to carry on as tourist productions under certain conditions, such as replacing some of the Hindu characters in the stories with Islamic characters, which was also common in Javanese shadow puppetry (*wayang kulit*) (cf. Hardwick 2013). The elimination of the *mak nyah* is interesting in the example of *ghazal parti*, because while occupying a controversial space in Malay culture, the *mak nyah* is quite common and often part of artistic expression historically.

According to one estimate, approximately 70-80% of male-to-female transgender Malaysians are Malay Muslims (Goh 2012:512). However, because *gambus* transmission is bound up with a kind of normative Malay (cisgender) male praxis that aligns with an urban,

mainstream version of Islamic identity, the state-led constructions of this genre are redefined through a “new Malay” lens. If the transgender dancers were present in the urban context, they would constitute a rupture in the dominant praxis. In the urban performance mentioned above, there is a rupture in the traditional, rural praxis due to the lack of *mak nyah* dancers. Since *ghazal* and *gambus* are performative bytes so bound up with a normative urban Malay identity, the non-normative components of traditional *ghazal parti* are removed or adjusted. In the case of the *mak nyah*, they are replaced with cisgender female dancers, and in the case of the exclusive Arabic lyrics, they are combined with Malay language songs, including songs not traditionally part of the *ghazal parti* repertoire—but a canonized component of the wider Malay music complex.

When I was in Johor watching my teacher, Raja Zul, perform at the Coronation of the new Sultan of Johor on 3 March 2015, there were *mak nyah* performers singing and dancing as a part of this *majlis*. I was able to speak with one of them, Siti, as I sat next to her during a pre-show dinner. Siti prayed alongside the other performers, later explaining to me that being a Muslim was an important part of her identity, yet she notably did not wear a *tudung* (headscarf) (personal communication, 3 March 2015). I view the commonplace example of *mak yah* performing alongside *gambus* genres at the *majlis* in rural Johor versus the state-sponsored event in KL as signifying the difference between two competing forces of Malay modernity that I mention in previous chapters, the “moderate,” neo-Islamic state politics versus the traditional, *adat*, syncretic, and rural components of Malay culture. In each case the *mak nyah* is a performative byte that transmits a traditional Malay identity, one that doesn’t fit the urban state-sponsored context.

## Disrupting Malayness through Gambus Performance

The previous sections discuss ways that the *gambus* reveals its others and reveals itself as an Other, while also threading together new seams to reinforce specific Malay identity formations. These identity formations revolved around ideas of Islam and a male identity praxis in *gambus* transmission. Since *gambus* is so bound up with Malay and Islamic identity, I found one of the most disruptive breaks in this praxis came from a non-Malay, non-Muslim performing *gambus* in Malaysia.

I met the *gambus* musician and Chinese Malaysian, Ken Hao, through Facebook. He had reached out to my teacher, Raja Zul, for lessons. While Zul agreed to teach him, nothing ever materialized and I wondered why. I do not believe either was explicitly avoiding the other due to racial issues, but I do believe the idea of Ken Hao within the Malaysian *gambus* praxis was a disruptive force. The following section illustrates how delicate the balance of identity is with *gambus* performance.

Ken was born in Malaysia but later moved with his family to Shanghai where he has stayed for the past eleven years. When I met him he was a *gambus/oud* enthusiast but had little interaction with the Malaysian *gambus* scene. He communicated with other Malaysian players through Facebook on *oud*-related topics. I view his Chinese Malaysian identity as a rupture in the Malay identity praxis described above in which the *gambus* is a dominant performative byte. In this praxis, Ken was not only an Other, but a staunch critic of Islam and religion in general. Reacting to his many anti-Islamic posts on Facebook, Raja Zul informed me that the “*gambus* community in Singapore is already blocking him,” referring to the First Singapore *Gambus* Conference, which took place on 25 October 2016 (personal communication, 29 September 2016). The conference attracted the community of *gambus* enthusiasts from Malaysia, along with

invited guests from around the world, but the largest group in attendance comprised Malay males. Ken did not attend.

Ken has studied with expatriates in China, for example, from Istanbul, who are able to teach knowledge of the *oud* removed from Malay traditions. He performs regularly and delivers lectures on the *oud* in China. In China, he is seen as a unique musician. In Malaysia, he is a rupture in the Malay identity praxis, unique, yes, but also a disrupting force. When I asked Ken if he felt welcome in the Malaysian *gambus* community, he said, “Mmm...I’d stand out for sure. Coz [sic] I’d probably be the only non-Malay” (personal communication, 19 November 2016). He recognized himself as a clear rupture in the way in which *gambus* players are viewed in Malaysia. Since his racial identity is such a strong performative byte of non-Malay identity, and because the *gambus* is such a strong performative byte of Malay identity, the seams in these praxes are unable to be rewoven into new formations—as in the previous examples. The contrast is too stark. The way Ken balances his own identity as an *oud* player is to relate to the secular aspects of Middle Eastern music and to a network of musicians from other parts of the world. In this praxis, value is placed on digging deep into the mechanics of music, thinking of the music as something all its own, and removed from religious performativity.

When I asked Ken about what drew him to the *gambus/oud*, his response had nothing to do with his being Malaysian, but instead he cited two reasons for his interest. The first was his introduction to the music through musicians from the Middle East, Turkey, and North Africa, whom he met as a student at Berklee College of Music in the United States. The second reason was that playing the *oud* was a way to make himself stand out as a musician, to “play something different” (personal communication, 19 November 2016). He says, “I can’t be bothered playing the same typical stuff most Asian/Chinese/ Malaysian ppl [sic] play” (ibid.). He continued, “[t]he

*gambus* scene in Malaysia is ok I guess, but I feel it's too race and religion oriented” (ibid.). His identity as a non-Malay makes him unique as a Malaysian *gambus* player, and therefore he uses it to his advantage. In other words, he uses the *gambus* praxis in Malaysia as a way to distinguish himself not only in Malaysia but amongst other *oud* musicians in the world. His stark contrast to other Malaysian *oudists* highlights the normative praxis, while also benefitting his career as a unique musician. In this way Ken is similar to Fauziah in that he has used his Otherness to forge a unique identity as a *gambus* musician. Both Ken and Fauziah appear outside the identity praxis and thus their presence is a recalcitrant force in dominant and pervasive praxes.

In Chapter 3 I describe a Malaysian *gambus* prototype that was commissioned from the Turkish maker, Farouk Turunz in Istanbul. I recall at one point my Turkish *oud*, which was also made by Farouk Turunz was not staying in tune as well as when I first purchased it. I also noticed there were “dead spots” on the neck, or places where the pitch was damped due to the proximity, or “action” between the board and strings. Raja Zul thought this was due to the humid tropical climate and said, “the Turkish woods do not function well in the Malaysian climate” (personal communication, 22 December 2015). Thus, the praxis formed through the identity transmitted through the Middle Eastern *ouds* was disrupted by the recalcitrant force of the Malaysian environment. The solution was to build a Malaysian *gambus* prototype that contained the quality and prestige of a Turkish *oud* while complementary to the tropical climate. In all the examples in this chapter, the recalcitrant forces and ruptures in dominant and pervasive identity transmission praxes were either reinforced to forge new, Othered identities, or to merge with the existing praxes by complementing and restructuring to become a better fit.

While in Borneo, I found Malay musicians merging more with a Bornean identity praxis instead of the Peninsular Malay identity found in urban KL—something I explore in more detail

in final section of this dissertation. One musician I met in Khota Bahru, Sabah, Najmie, a *ney* player told me he moved to Sabah to work, but only performed as a solo musician in Sabah. He explained that he had to return to his home just outside of KL, in Shah Alam, to perform with other musicians that played Middle Eastern and Malay music. I see this as an example of an individual choosing not to merge with a new praxis, not disrupting the Peninsular praxis in Borneo, nor disrupting a Bornean-focused praxis, but instead maintaining the praxis that privileges Middle Eastern music by avoiding the Bornean scene altogether.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Judith Butler discusses ways that discursive formations, for example, legislative decisions, are invoked in culture as normalized foundational premises that subsequently legitimize those formations' own regulatory hegemony (2002:4). Subjects are forced to respond to these normalized identity categories either by leaning into a naturalized category or away from it, or possibly by merging with it. Subjects can merge with these categories, often unintentionally, by converging other naturalized categories, the construction of which is concealed by the foundational, legitimizing, and structural premise that is assumed as *a priori* fact.

The performative reactions to normative praxes discussed in this chapter reveal the delicate foundations upon which the flow of expressive culture is built. Oftentimes these foundations are taken for granted, initially built on discursive political articulations of identity. As Hoffstaedter notes, it is not difficult to guess a Malaysian's ethnic identity (referred to as "race" in Malaysia), "based on the racial and social profiling at which most Malaysians are very skilled" (2011:1). The reason for this proficiency in racial profiling is largely owed to the explicit bias in many facets of Malaysian social life, though usually implicit in its enactment. A recent

controversy in Muar, Johor, where a launderette owner refused provide service to non-Muslims, sparked a response from Prime Minister Najib Razak. He is quoted as saying:

I don't believe in exclusivity, let there not be a launderette only for Muslims... There should be choice, you don't want to go to a particular restaurant because you think it's not halal, it's your decision... Muslims have their own set of beliefs but we cannot impose this on non-Muslims. As long as you don't disturb us we don't disturb you" (Fong 2017).

Speaking in front of the Malaysia Chinese Youth Summit, by portraying race relations in such an us-them fashion, i.e., "don't disturb us we don't disturb you," this reflects the strict division between identity categories in Malaysia's popular imagination. Thus, the rhetoric fed into the popular imagination is essentialist in nature. In a sense, this entire dissertation examines ways that musicians performatively engage with this essentialism, both reinforcing and circumventing it.

The top-down insertion and assertion of innate racial categories as mapped to religious categories is pervasive and driven by the authoritarian portrayal of racial politics that relies on the human brain's aptitude for matching symbols to categories. It has been argued that Malaysians are particularly skilled in racial profiling because throughout its colonial and post-colonial history, politics were organized in some terms by racial essentialism (cf. Roff 1967). This essentialism was so strict despite and because of the complexity of the plural social milieu, i.e., the British needed to control it (ibid.). The essentialism built into various identity praxes is perceived as natural, but when ruptures occur, their weak seams are revealed. As a result, performative transmission bytes reveal new formations of identity praxes, or they silence certain components in favor of others. Either way, they must react to normative models.

I have shown in this chapter how individuals use the agency within dominant identity praxes to invert them and assert alternative identities, while sometimes affirming naturalized praxes in turn. The function of performative transmission bytes in this process is overlapping and

complex, varying based on subtle changes in the symbolic ecology, much of which has to do with an incidental, and often material recalcitrance that resists a static and normative praxes built by a dominant hegemony. By performing identity through the arts, praxes are complicated and transcended. Ultimately, however, the dominant narratives are usually reinforced even when they are transcended, which is why identity categories are so ubiquitous and powerful in the first place.

## Chapter 6: The Power of Place in Gambus Transmission: Borneo and the Peninsula

After spending 13 months and several shorter research trips attempting to interpret Malay identity politics in Peninsular Malaysia through *gambus* transmission, I ventured to East Malaysian Borneo where Malay identity manifested differently than on the Peninsula. I chose to spend my time almost exclusively in Sabah, because this is the primary East Malaysian state with a *gambus* scene, including *gambus* making. When I visited with Malay *gambus* makers and attended various performances that included the *gambus*, I noticed that musicians downplayed the Islamicate Malay connection in an apparent attempt to connect with a wider Sabahan expressive arts scene. Given this push for a pan-Sabahan identity during my work with Sabahan Malay musicians, I contacted a grassroots civil rights organization, known as PAN Sabah, which advocated for a united Sabahan identity. I was curious if there was any Malay presence in this organization. Since they often collaborate with local artists who support their cause, I thought there might be Malay artists collaborating with this group. I received this response:

There is no Malay presence in our organisation. You should know that there has never been a 'Malay race' in Sabah. The term 'Malay' in the Malaysian context have somewhat been politicised since the formation of Malaysia in 1963. Article 160 of the Federal Constitution defines the term "Malay" as a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, conforms to Malay custom and (a) was before Merdeka Day [Independence Day] born in the Federation or in Singapore or born of parents one of whom was born in the Federation or in Singapore, or is on that day domiciled in the Federation or in Singapore; or (b) is the issue of such a person. This is a thorny issue in Sabah especially in relation to Islamisation activities involving Sabahan (and Sarawakian) natives by the Federal Government. However, despite the sad political realities in our nation, we believe that music and arts are industries that keep our people together (email correspondence, 7 May 2016).

I have argued that the *gambus* is a strong marker of Malay identity and given that there is a Malay *gambus* culture and presence in Sabah, it is interesting that an organization such as PAN Sabah would outright reject the idea that any Malays even exist in the state.

This final section to the dissertation builds on research that I conducted in the East Malaysian state of Sabah and a more limited analysis of my experiences on the island of Labuan, both part of Malaysian Borneo. Most of this research occurred during the last phase of my dissertation fieldwork in 2015-2016. While most of my dissertation research focuses on Malay identity and cultural expression in West Malaysia, I found the experience of Malays pursuing their indigenous identity through music in Borneo as their homeland completely unique from the situation in Peninsular Malaysia. The purpose of this concluding essay is to examine a localized, Bornean performative challenge to the more stereotypical and culturally normative notions of Malayness that are perpetuated by Peninsular “Straits Malay” identity politics in the Malaysian national political arena (cf. Collins 2004). This chapter describes a contrasting case example to *gambus* transmission in West Malaysia, bolstering the argument for the importance of place in Malay identity negotiation. As Bates describes, “[e]ven the same instrument, in different socio-historical contexts, may be implicated in categorically different kinds of relations” (2012:364). Throughout this dissertation I highlight the importance placed on distinguishing between urban versus rural identities. This chapter reveals another dynamic, Peninsular versus Bornean Malay identity negotiation. When combined with ideas of indigenous cultural expression outside of “mainland” West Malaysia, *gambus* transmission practices disrupt normative notions of Malay and indigenous identity in the country.

My research in Sabah was limited to three 2-week trips, so this chapter is largely hypothetical. My Sabah case example is useful, however, in working through ideas for future research plans. My hypothesis is twofold: I first posit that Bornean Malay Muslim cultural practices are distanced from West Malaysian identity politics in order to better mesh with an indigenous Bornean value system; and second, a greater attitude of religious and multiethnic

acceptance occurred between members of Malay and non-Malay groups in the shared musical experiences in Sabah than those I encountered on the mainland. I view these processes as expressive ways to circumvent the more difficult ideological differences between Sabahan groups. This chapter explores a performative challenge to the notion that Malay identity is restricted to the scope of language, religion, and sultan. The religious component, the performance of which Hoffstaedter calls “Islamicity,” is what I argue is the dominant framework from which *gambus* music transmits Malay identity in the Peninsula. I explore ways that musicians both downplay and exert this same identity performative strategy, vying for cultural capital in the Bornean context.

While in Sabah, Malay *gambus* musicians worked to fit their expressive craft into a Sabahan value system that resists the same identity politics of the Peninsula. It is arguable that the motivation behind this cultural acceptance and indigenous community-building initiated by Sabahan Malays owes largely to the underlying resentment many non-Malay Sabahans harbor for mainland Malay hegemony. Since Malays are in the minority in Sabah, individual Malays might feel the need to counter this attitude of resentment with behavior that encourages cultural harmony. This situation is not altogether different from my conclusions about Malay cultural expression in the urban context, where *gambus* transmission is used to authenticate Malay identity in urban Malaysia. In Sabah, I hypothesize that much of the symbolic power behind this community building, and the success in bridging indigenous communities, is due to the shared symbolic ecology of the Bornean homeland that eclipses identity politics at the federal level. In this way, the identity politics at work in current Bornean Malay musical culture was transnational in a unique sense, one that captured the performative expression of a regional transindigeneity that shifted beyond federal ideas of citizenship and modernity. Instead of

situating a “moderate” global Islamic cultural presence, as was the case in the urban context, the *gambus* transmission in Sabah took the form of a grassroots, indigenous expression that was not so heavily aligned with global frameworks of modernity.

### **Ethnomusicology in Borneo**

Ethnomusicologists focusing on Borneo largely study the musical practices of the non-Malay indigenous groups, such as Gorlinski (1989) and Kedit (1976) who examine the *sapeh* music of the Kenyah in Sarawak, Malaysia and Kalimantan, Indonesia. Pugh-Kitingan also focuses on the *anak negeri*, (or “children of the state [Sabah]”), bringing attention to the importance of the arts in indigenous ritual (2014). Much of the ethnomusicological work in Borneo focuses on organology and taxonomic types of studies in the region (see Liew 1962, Matusky 1985, or Pugh-Kitingan 2011). Other Malaysian scholars have conducted studies on Malay identity in Borneo, but these number in the few and are largely focused in the fields of linguistics and archaeology (see Collins and Sariyan 2006). Early anthropological studies mainly focus on the infamous “head hunters” of Borneo (Krohn 1927 or Bock 1882). While scholarship of Bornean culture is somewhat limited, especially in Malaysian Borneo, it continues to grow (see King et al 2017). However, the study of Malay performance practices as combined with indigenous practices in Borneo is rare (see Matusky and Pugh-Kitingan 2004 for a discussion of Malay *pantun* in the Bornean context).

### **Background**

While in Sabah, I found two major types of Malay identity in Sabah, a Bruneian-Sabahan Malay identity, which was often intermixed with other indigenous Muslim groups, such as the Bajau ethnolinguistic group; and a Peninsular Malay identity comprising individuals who were visiting or moved from the Peninsula to Borneo. I observed *gambus* musicians in the first

camp playing mostly the Hadhrami style *gambus*, or a hybrid style of Hadhrami *gambus* and *oud* (see Fauziah's instrument in Figure 28), while negotiating their Malayness using a pan-Bornean performative strategy. Musicians from the latter group performed on mostly imported Turkish or Egyptian *ouds* and participated in some of the same identity processes found in the Peninsula. While these two groups overlapped in significant ways, I spend the first part of this section discussing my experiences with the first group. I conclude the section with some ethnographic examples of my experiences with the second group in Borneo.

Recall from Chapter 1 the 1971 Malaysian constitutional amendment implementing affirmative action for native communities. Placing Malay citizenship at the top of the hierarchy—citing claims of past disenfranchisement during the colonial era—has fomented resentment amongst many non-Malay regional inhabitants of East Malaysian Borneo that, like the Malays, claim indigenous status (Kamal 2009:11). Many of these regional communities fear the Malays will increasingly benefit from affirmative action, for example, by gaining preferential treatment in government jobs, thereby pushing non-Malays further into the margins of Malaysian society.

Immediately prior to Malaysia's formation, Sabah's two primary indigenous ethnolinguistic groups, the Kadazandusuns and the Muruts, collectively formed 36.9 percent of the population as compared to a 0.4 percent Muslim Malay population (Kamal 2009:12). By the year 2000, the number of Kadazandusuns and Muruts collectively dropped to 21.3% as compared to the Muslim Malay population rising to 12.4 percent (*ibid.*).<sup>21</sup> While Malay citizens enjoy the dominant cultural capital of their racial category in West Malaysia, I found that many of the self-identified Malays with whom I interacted in Sabah struggled to reconcile this majority identity

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<sup>21</sup> The primary non-indigenous population of Sabah is Chinese. Sabah also has one of the largest populations of expatriates and non-citizens, with a large Filipino population, in Malaysia.

with their conceptions of self as indigenous Sabahan Malays. Interestingly, I found that through traditional music transmission, Sabahan Malays negotiated between senses of homeland and an indigenous, Bornean identity by engaging with a flexible, syncretic music complex and by engaging with the material culture from which this music complex emerged.

In the opening chapter, I note that after the Malaysian race riots in 1969, the government endeavored to create a “common culture” amongst Malaysian citizens (Tan Sooi Beng 1992:283). As a result, the Ministry of Culture, Youth, and Sports formed to foster this goal. However, this organization was dominated by ideas of “Malayizing” Malaysian culture more than equitably expressing its diversity (ibid.). Traditional art forms promoted under the auspices of this organization framed Malay arts in indigenous terms, while washing over pre-Islamic Malay aesthetics with those that highlighted an Islamic cultural history. In Chapter 3, I note the increasing shift of the *gambus* to the center of various Malay ensembles, representing an Islamic Malay focus both visually and aurally. In Sabah, I saw the *gambus* playing a more equitable role in ensembles that drew from a wider Bornean musical palette, reflecting similar trends in wider indigenous Bornean arts complexes.

Ethnomusicologist Jacqueline Pugh-Kitingan discusses the importance of the term *mitimbang* in Dusunic languages of Borneo (spoken by the Kadazandusun people), which means “balanced,” reflecting the attitudes of these groups toward all aspects of social life and their relationship to the environment (2014:170). Some resentment occurs amongst indigenous Sabahans who equate Malay identity with the federal government. Many Sabahans feel that the government has consistently failed to recognize the partial sovereignty agreed upon as a condition of its incorporation into Malaysia in 1963 (Kamal 2009:24). This resentment was fueled by actions to divert resources, timber for example, from Sabah to the Peninsula in order to

shore up the mainland economy, rather than investing in ecologically and economically sustainable practices locally (Brookfield et al 2005:99).

Non-Malay Sabahans are prone to resentment against Malays who they feel represent this governmental attitude toward the natural environment, as exploitable. Furthermore, because religious identity is closely tied to race in Malaysia, further tensions exist between non-Muslim and Muslim indigenous groups. Thus, I find it interesting that Malay musicians reached out to non-Muslim indigenous groups, not only by collaborating on projects and sonically fusing their music with characteristics of non-Malay idioms, but also in their attitude toward the equitable balance of social roles and the environment in music production. In Sabah, there was a deliberate effort by Malay musicians to promote sustainable practices in instrument building by recycling materials and promoting the local (and not exported) use of natural resources. This cultural attitude of balance was reinforced amongst the musicians with whom I worked as they engaged with a Bornean value system with the purpose of avoiding much of the regional political turmoil.

I conducted the bulk of my Bornean research in the district of Bongawan, named after the Malay word, *bangau*, a type of bird that symbolizes the importance of balance between humans and nature (personal communication with *gambus* maker Hashim Rosyim, 2 August 2016). While in the workshop, I was struck by the bird carvings that adorned each peg box, which were unlike those I encountered in West Malaysia. During my time in Bongawan, I witnessed a deliberate, performative engagement with the topic of a combined Malay and Bornean indigenous identity through a fusion of various expressive idioms, those that included an array of instrumentation. I suggest that each instrument bears unique and significant symbolic power in Malay-indigenous identity relations. Some of these instruments include the *gambus* lute of Hadhrami origin, which as I have repeatedly iterated, is an instrument often conflated with

Islamic culture on the Peninsula (Hilarian 2005), the *sapeh* (lute), and *kulintang* (gong chimes) made from recycled steel lanterns. The latter two instruments are well-known markers of indigenous identity in northern Borneo (Gorlinski 1989 and Cadar 1973, respectively). Based on my initial observations, I hypothesize that this incorporation of wider indigenous eco-cultural expression into Malay culture through musical practice reflects an absorption of a Sabahan indigenous worldview that places value on balance and order in nature, social roles, and between earthly and spiritual realms.

### **Approaching Concepts of Indigeneity and Homeland outside the Peninsula**

Following the influence of performance studies, I approach this study of indigeneity in the Malay world with the understanding that “indigenous ontologies and epistemologies are largely enacted, and relationships between indigenous communities and nations have always been negotiated in large part through performance” (Knowles 2015:ix). Having spent my graduate work trying to understand Malay identity in Peninsular Malaysia, where Malays make up the slight majority, I found intriguing ways that Malay identity was enacted through performance in places where Malays are not the largest group. In political scientist Duncan McCargo’s research on the Malays in southern Thailand, he reveals ways in which Islamic culture is both asserted and stifled in a majority Buddhist landscape (2008). Similarly, in Borneo, I found that Sabahan Malay musicians sought to converge their expressive cultural identity with fields of expression in a non-Muslim majority area. Here I find a unique example of the push-and-pull of indigenous versus transindigenous modes of identity performance in a place where the federal Malay identity politics otherwise dominate the popular conception of what it means to be a Malay in Malaysia.

By situating myself within a living sound and material archive, I reveal ways in which Sabahan Malays challenge “maximal” and static identity categories (Daniels 2005:57) of race and nation in Malaysia through a fluid conception of a traditional Malay music complex. This complex is referred to as *muzik Melayu*, *muzik Sabah*, or *muzik Melayu Sabah*, among other endonyms, varying depending on where each performance draws its major influences. I consider this naming an exercise in identity performance that varies depending on the cultural and geographic background of the person describing it. I call this multifaceted expression of traditional Malay music a complex due to its ever-adaptable fusion of influences that comprises theatre, dance, martial arts, poetry, and musical idioms that draw from various ideas of indigenous and transindigenous performative identity, where “the nations *transed* are indigenous nations, not settler states” (Knowles 2015:x, original emphasis). I posit that the shifting of styles, names, and other performative characteristics reflects a nuanced understanding of Malay identity that challenges ideas of indigeneity, race, and nationalism in Malaysia, contesting some of the most dominant notions of Malayness on the Peninsula.

### **Peninsular Malay Identity in Bornean Gambus Transmission**

While in Borneo I met several *gambus* (and related) musicians who were performing their Peninsular Malay Muslim identity similar to what I found occurring in KL. I noticed a stark contrast between the Bornean performative strategies I observed amongst the Bruneian-Sabahan Malays and those who were “expatriate” Peninsular Malays visiting or living in Borneo. While attending the Borneo Arts Festival held on the island of Labuan, I observed these two camps competing for cultural capital within the framework of a *gambus* competition. During the competition, talented young musicians performed traditional Malay songs, battling for the grand prize of five thousand Malaysian ringgit (slightly more than one thousand USD). The

competition itself highlighted the *gambus*, but each *gambus* musician was accompanied by a band, which typically comprised frame percussion, a drum kit, and electric instrumentation, such as the electric guitar and synthesizer.

Several participants were Sabahan Malays who came to Labuan for the festival. These musicians performed hybrid pieces that combined familiar songs from the Peninsula and those with which I was less familiar, those songs apparently more prevalent in the Bornean context. The bands coming from the Peninsula performed more *taksim* and songs from a combined Malay and Arabic repertoire. The judges leaned toward the aesthetic preferences of Peninsular Malays, and thus the winner was a band that performed this kind of identity, one that privileged the dominant values associated with an urban Peninsular *gambus* praxis.

In an informational session the night before the competition, judges held a roundtable for performers to ask questions regarding the judging process. I witnessed the look of shock on many local musicians' faces when one of the judges said, "we will look for knowledge of *makam* in *taksim* performances" (15 September 2015). After talking with some of the musicians, I learned that many of them had little knowledge of *makam*. Most of the musicians I talked to grew up learning songs by rote, the common practice in Malay music. This lack of formal theoretical knowledge of *oud* traditions excluded many of the Bornean players, in a sense Othering them by asserting an aesthetic value system dominant in the KL institutions with which I was familiar. One judge opined that it was the responsibility of the musician to know their craft, and a knowledge of *makam* was important in *gambus* playing (personal communication, 15 September 2015). Thus, asserting this dominant value system or praxis in the Bornean context disrupted the local framework while reinforcing a transnational Malay musical identity.

At the end of the *gambus* competition, an Islamic *peringatan* (sermon/”reminder”) was hosted by a well-known *ustaz* on the same stage as the competition. Since so many musicians were around for the festival, event organizers invited him and several others to perform Middle Eastern, or what they call “Oriental music,” during the televised event. During the preceding festival and competition, the repertoire was weighted toward traditional Malay songs, while during the *peringatan*, a more Middle Eastern theme was palpable. Thus, I see this as yet another example where the *gambus* stored multiple kinds of competing information within its sonic and material bytes. In this case, the remote island festival contained the *gambus* byte transmitting both a local Bornean Malay identity and a normalized Peninsular identity that was more transnational in character. When Islam entered the scene more explicitly, another layer of transnational globalized transmission of Malay identity fully eclipsed the local expressive framework.

I found some other evidence in Sabah of musicians performing this Islamicate sphere, vying for relevance in the similar ways as in the Peninsula. While most of my contacts in Sabah asserted themselves as part of the pan-Sabahan framework I describe above, I met one individual, Pak Mustafa, who worked to support musicians performing in the transnational Islamicate expressive framework I observed in the Peninsula. Pak Mustafa hosted a *gambus* group at his house in Sabah, lending his guesthouse as a rehearsal space. The group performed familiar songs that I heard in the Peninsula. Many of them were from KL, but moved to Borneo seeking employment in government positions. They were different from the other musicians I describe earlier in this chapter in that they performed the Peninsular repertoire and did not play the Sabahan, Hadhrami style *gambus*. Instead, these musicians played imported Middle Eastern *ouds* or *gambus* constructed on the Peninsula in the Middle Eastern styles. They rehearsed

regularly so that they could attend competitions around Malaysia, perform at social events, and perform abroad, including a recent trip to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. These musicians evoked a global Malay Muslim identity that was familiar to me coming from the Peninsula and was a stark contrast to most of the other *gambus* musicians and makers with whom I worked in Borneo. Many of the Sabahan musicians were uneasy at the presence of these “expatriates,” given their perpetuation of a dominant Straits Malay identity praxis.

When I attended the planning meetings for the *Gambus* Festival at the National Museum in KL, it was mentioned that in previous years the festival was held in Sabah. However, this festival was moved to KL due to disagreements about aesthetic values reflected in the festival. Raja Zul said that many Sabahans were “paranoid” that the musicians in KL were “trying to steal their culture” (personal communication, 25 February 2015). This was confusing to Zul because, as he said, “we are all Malaysians” (ibid.). I found a similar anxiety amongst Sabahan *gambus* musicians concerning their relationship to Peninsular Straits Malayness. I found that much of this anxiety was due to the resentment they faced as Malays in Borneo. This anxiety was less a fear that Peninsular Malay *gambus* musicians would steal the Bornean practices, but that they would eclipse them as a hegemonic force, thus deteriorating the indigenous and localized symbolic capital that they were trying to imbue in their Sabahan praxis.

These experiences showed me how powerful various layers of performative transmission bytes are in the process of identity expression through music. In the Sabahan case, the incorporation of visually and sonically local instruments, such as the gong chimes, *sapeh* lute, and Bornean *gambus* with bird peg boxes, merged Malay identity expression with a pan-Sabahan performativity. In the case of the *gambus* competition and the *gambus* group hosted at Pak

Mustafa's house, the song and instrument choices reflected competing forces of identity in the Bornean context.

Towards the end of my fieldwork, I had the opportunity to take *sapeh* lessons from the renowned Bornean musician with heritage from the Kelabit ethnolinguistic group, Alena Murang. She mentioned her *sapeh* musician friend who formed a musical duo with a *gambus* player, referring me to a Youtube video of their performance. When I watched the video, I was intrigued to see that the *gambus* musician was playing a Middle Eastern style *oud* (see Figure 31). This instrument would represent the Peninsula and/or a wider transnational Islamicate framework in the popular Malaysian imagination, and especially amongst Malaysian musicians. However, because I did not speak with these individuals, I cannot confirm that the use of this instrument was not due to incidental factors, such as the availability of Middle Eastern *ouds* or the better playability/sound quality. Nonetheless, the juxtaposition of identity categories was deliberate. I was intrigued to find the performative transmission bytes contained within the performance materially and sonically linking a Peninsular Malay identity with a Bornean indigenous one. Furthermore, I was not surprised to find this fusion given my other experiences in Sabah.



Figure 31: *Gambus* and *sapeh* player juxtaposing Peninsular Malay and Bornean indigenous expressions. Screen capture by Joseph Kinzer. Accessed 21 November 2017. Youtube video by Nomadic Lion < <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b0BJABeJN9A>>.

## Final Thoughts

My Borneo research contributes to the cross-disciplinary discussion of indigenous identity politics in a world influenced by increasingly global ideas of modernity and cultural exchange. My approach to transindigenous identity politics and the symbolic ecology of Malaysian Borneo contributes to the wider discussion of the role of creative expression in reflecting not only a political zeitgeist or power structure, but the ability of groups to transcend political turmoil by engaging in local, community-building, and environmentally sensitive expressive practices. Many ethnomusicological theses are propounded to reveal either a challenge and/or reinforcement of dominant cultural forces in a given field site. In addition to these important goals, this research has the potential to contribute a nuanced understanding to how communities emerge and disengage from these powerful national and transnational forces while reconvening at the local level. These localized sites of community expression are influenced by and influence wider cultural forces, while creating their own unique economies

and cultural patterns that are grounded in the material and symbolic ecology of sites from which these creative expressions emerge.

This chapter has shown how performative transmission bytes take on new meaning by their change of locale from the Peninsula to the island of Borneo. This chapter shows that because Malay identity looms large in Malaysian identity politics, it is difficult for artists to avoid articulating some version of it or a response to it. Given the ubiquity with which the *gambus* is associated with Malay performing arts and Islamic cultural expression, it is a challenge for a minority Malay group to fit this cultural expression into the Bornean indigenous framework, where non-Malays make up the majority *Bumiputera* population, unlike in the Peninsula. Similarly, as in chapter 5 where I examine modes of Malay identity praxis and their ruptures, the dominant praxis in this chapter is a Bornean indigeneity that is non-Malay. Thus, the Malay cultural expression in *gambus* transmission becomes a rupture itself, highlighting the power of a Bornean-centered political will in this state while also drawing attention to the pervasive identity negotiation in wider Malaysian national politics.

Throughout this dissertation, I have used the *gambus* as an anchor to reveal identity negotiations that connect with and extend a wider symbolic ecology. I began by showing the ubiquity with which the *gambus* was indexed with Malay Muslim identity in Kuala Lumpur, illustrating its potency as a performative transmission byte nested within other bytes. I then argued that the *gambus* acts as a way to fold Malay identity into the urban framework while avoiding contentiously and explicitly referencing religious politics. At the same time these practices were imbued with an Islamic cultural identity. The power of the *gambus* to negotiate such relevant and salient politics in Malaysia's plural society rests in multiple agentic forces both human and nonhuman, all operating within a symbolic ecology. I then moved on to reveal ways

that the *gambus* perpetuates a hegemonic identity narrative, while the recalcitrant forces of the symbolic ecology work to erode these very forces. At the same time, the erosion of these forces highlights the stark contrast to the dominant narrative, thus reinforcing the dominant praxis with which these ruptures conflict. I ended by illustrating how the *gambus* carried with it dominant identity formations outside of Peninsular Malaysia, while also performatively challenging these dominant Malay praxes by aligning with a Bornean value system. This value system privileged ideas of balance, the natural environment, homeland, and indigeneity.

Through my fieldwork, I learned that the symbolic ecologies of identity negotiation are delicate, though strong in their persistent performative enactment. It became clear to me that the symbolic capital contained within expressive culture, the Malay music complex, and the materials of this expressive culture, even a single musical instrument like the *gambus*, are powerful and as natural as any part of the material environment within which human actants participate as parts of an expressive network. Humans and nonhuman materials alike interact and become physical sites for identity negotiation where symbols are embodied through small units, or performative transmission bytes. These bytes combine to make up a force that is greater than the sum of its parts, powerful yet fragile as the natural, built, and symbolic environments that host them.

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