

# ***Orang Kalur* - Musicians of the Royal Nobat of Perak**

**Raja Iskandar Bin Raja Halid**

## **Abstract**

Unlike any other traditional Malay music, nobat has a tradition that prohibits anyone other than the ruler and members of his family, and the court musicians from playing or even touching the instruments. In the courts of Perak, Kedah and Selangor, these royal musicians are called *orang kalur* and hereditary in nature. Also known as *orang muntah lembu* (people of the bull's vomit), this ancient Malay family has been an indispensable part of the royal *adat istiadat* (customs and ceremonies) throughout the ages. This paper attempts to unravel the mystery surrounding the orang kalur, their origins, status and roles; and how their strict adherence to traditional beliefs and taboos affects the music of the nobat.



The nobat orchestra performing in the Bilik Nobat, Istana Iskandariah, Kuala Kangsar.

(Photograph by Raja Iskandar Raja Halid)

## Introduction

In Malay society, the *nobat* orchestra is a symbol of a Sultan's status and sovereignty, and forms part of the treasured royal regalia of the state. At present there are five nobat ensembles that are still active, four in the states of Kedah, Perak, Selangor and Terengganu in Peninsula Malaysia and one in Brunei, a sovereign country sandwiched between the two East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak. No Malay Sultan in these states is officially installed unless he is ceremoniously drummed to the sounds of the nobat. The Yang di-Pertuan Agong (literally 'the Paramount Ruler'), a position rotated every five years among the nine Malay rulers, is also *ditabalkan* (installed) using the nobat.<sup>1</sup>

A basic nobat ensemble consists of a *nengkara* (kettledrum), a pair of *gendang* (double headed drums), a *nafiri* (long silver horn) and *serunai* (quadruple reed shawm). In Kedah and Brunei *gongs* are added, while *kopak-kopak* (small cymbals) is used in Terengganu. For centuries, nobat remains as one of the most mysterious and least exposed of Malay traditional art forms due to the strict adherence of certain *pantang larang* (taboos) and exclusive nature of its performance. Confined within the palace walls, this royal orchestra performs only on certain occasions, such as the installation of the sultan and to mark the beginning of royal functions or ceremonies. No performance is allowed without the command and consent of the Sultan.

The Perak sultanate is one of the oldest in Malaysia.<sup>2</sup> Its *adat istiadat* or customs and ceremonies, regalia and rulers' lineage can be traced back to the Melaka sultanate of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century. Inevitably, the Perak nobat is also one of the oldest and although the present instruments may not be the original Melaka set, nevertheless, its music opens up a window that gives us a glimpse of its glorious past. An ancient Malay art form, nobat binds together

---

<sup>1</sup> Sultans without their own nobat would use Kedah's ensemble for the installation ceremony.

<sup>2</sup> Perak is considered to be the second oldest to Kedah.

an amalgamation of animistic, Hindu-Buddhist and Islamic culture and beliefs, which culminates into a sacrosanct musical entity symbolizing a Sultan's stature and sovereignty.

Musicians of the Perak nobat are called *orang kalur* or *orang kalo* and hereditary in nature. Hereditary musicians are common in many parts of the world; there are the 'Klezmer' Jews and Gypsies of Eastern Europe, the Griots of West Africa and the Manganiyars of Western Rajasthan, India. Some families of musicians in Northern India even specialize or are divided into lineages of soloists and accompanists.<sup>3</sup> In Japan's imperial court between the 10th and 19th century, specialization of certain instruments such as the *shô* (mouth organ), *hichiriki* (reed pipe), *fue* (flutes), were passed down through specific hereditary families.<sup>4</sup> Although there are a few *orang kalur* who specialize in their respective instruments, and are passed down by their fathers, this is not strictly practiced.

In the Perak court, other than the Sultan and his family, the nobat instruments can only be handled and played by this ancient Malay family. Numerous cases of illness or deaths were believed to have been attributed to the touching or playing of the instruments by those who are not from the *orang kalur* lineage (Linehan 1951, Raja Nor Sheela 1987, Skeat 2004). One similar story was told by a retired *serunai* player which involved a nobat musician who mysteriously went blind after playing one of the instruments. It was later found out that he was not a true blood *orang kalur* but came from *tanah* (earth), signifying matrilineal lineage (Hj. Lop Zahari,<sup>5</sup> personal interview, November 24, 2006). Also known as *orang muntah lembu* (people of the bull's vomit), the *orang kalur* have gone through numerous stages of transformation which involved their functions and status in the history of the Malay sultanate.

---

<sup>3</sup> Neuman, D.M. (1977). The Social Organization of a Music Tradition: Hereditary Specialists in North India. *Ethnomusicology*, Vol. 21, No. 2. (May, 1977), pp. 235.

<sup>4</sup> Naoko Terauchi (2008). World Arbiter 2009, Japanese Traditional Music. Retrieved April 8, 2009 from <http://www.arbiterrecords.com/notes/2009notes.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Retired *serunai* player of the Perak nobat, now playing for the Selangor nobat, father of Azini, the present Perak *serunai* player.

## History

According to Linehan (1951), the word *kalur* or *kalau* (as he spelled it) probably came from the Malay word *susur galur* which means “going back to the origins” or “pedigree” and orang kalur was thus translated as “men who have to do with genealogies.” Sheppard (1983) speculates that they were probably keepers of the royal family records.<sup>6</sup> This is similar to the *mirasis* of Northern India, who, besides being hereditary professional musicians, are also the maintainer of their clients’ genealogy.<sup>7</sup> Linehan further suggested that kalur could also originate from the Cham word *kalau* which means *pulau* (island) in Malay. However, based on this interpretation, it is hard to see any relation between these “Men of the Island(s)” and their profession as nobat musicians, except probably that most of their members dwell in an area called Pulau Tiga (literally Three Islands) in Perak.

In Perak, besides being royal musicians, the orang kalur also serves as Toh Seri Nara Diraja or the chief herald of the palace. Toh Seri Nara Diraja is considered a ‘higher’ and ‘purer’ orang kalur who plays a crucial role in court ceremonies. In an interview with Raja Kobat Salehuddin,<sup>8</sup> the late *Allahyarham* Toh Seri Nara Diraja Nong bin Chik said that his lineage comes from Sang Kala, brother of Sang Sapurba, considered to be the first Malay ruler, as narrated by *Sejarah Melayu* (Malay Annals). According to Wilkinson (2008), it was a step brother of Sang Sapurba, whose mother married a *jin* (genie) as her second husband and the head of this family was given the title Seri Bijaya Indera.<sup>9</sup> This title could have been changed to Seri Bija Diraja during the Melaka sultanate, which was held by the orang muntah lembu. Raja Kobat argues that the word *kala* was later pronounced as *kalo*, by the Minangkabau community of Perak (personal interview, December 16, 2006). Another

---

<sup>6</sup> Sheppard, M. (1983). *Taman Saujana: Dance, Drama, Music, and Magic in Malaya, Long and Not-So-Long Ago*. Petaling Jaya: International Book Service, pp. 19.

<sup>7</sup> Neuman, D.M. (1977), *op. cit.*, pp. 237.

<sup>8</sup> Renowned songwriter and avid researcher of Perak royal history. He is also the grandson of Almarhum Sultan Abdul Aziz, the 31<sup>st</sup> Sultan of Perak.

<sup>9</sup> Wilkinson, R.J. (2008). *Papers on Malay Subjects, Part I-IV*. Charleston: BiblioLife, pp. 84-85.

interesting coincidence is that *kala* also means art forms, virtues and special skills in Sanskrit. According to the Hindu tradition, these skills include witchcraft, sword making, carving, making and playing of musical instruments.<sup>10</sup> Besides music, some players of the Perak nobat are also skilled in masonry, carving and, *gendang* and pottery making. They were once tax (known as *beman kalur*) collectors for the Bendahara<sup>11</sup>, going around kampongs carrying the *baur* (sword of office) and collecting fifty cents from each household annually.<sup>12</sup>



Encik Abdul Aziz Yahya's pottery workshop and showroom in Pulau Tiga, Perak  
(Photograph by Raja Iskandar Raja Halid)

The orang kalur admitted, although rather reticently, that they are the descendants of the orang muntah lembu, although Wilkinson (2008) thought they were two separate families.<sup>13</sup> They are at lost on how to explain their ancestry and in this modern world, this claim may seem absurd. The term *muntah lembu* was derived from the story of the miraculous appearance of a herald named Bat from the foam that flowed out of the mouth of a bull ridden by Nila Pahlawan, Kerisyana Pendita and Nila Utama. The appearance of these princes of Raja Suran in Bukit Saguntang, Palembang is written in the Sejarah Melayu:

---

<sup>10</sup> See <http://www.worldlibrary.net/eBooks/HimalayanAcademy/SacredHinduLiterature/dws/lexicon/k.html>, retrieved March 30, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> The premier chief of Perak and titular prime minister, post was abolished in 1959.

<sup>12</sup> Wilkinson, R.J. (2008), *op. cit.*, pp. 77.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 84.

*“Maka dengan takdir Allah taala lembu kenaikan baginda itupun muntahkan buih, maka keluarlah daripada buih itu seorang manusia laki-laki dinamai Bat dan destarnya terlalu besar”<sup>14</sup>*

Although *Sejarah Melayu* was written by a Muslim during a period of Malay Muslim dominance, there are still strong Hindu elements and influences in his writing. *Sejarah Melayu* artfully interweaves Hindu beliefs and myths in its narration while at the same time comfortably cloaked in Islamic garb. A bull is considered sacred by Hindus, especially a white one. Known as Nandi, this white bull is a loyal servant and ride of Lord Siva; and symbolizes truth, justice and manhood. Hindus believe cows were responsible for the birth of the first human and everything that they produce is considered sacred, including milk and excrement.<sup>15</sup>

When *Sejarah Melayu* tells the story of the 'birth' of a man named Bat from the vomit of a bull, it actually symbolizes the sacrosanct and important nature of the person. As A. Ghani Ismail puts it:

Muntah Lembu! The Bull's Vomit was yet another matrix from which the celestial rose through Nature in a human form. Malay princes and princesses had emerged from the Buluh Betong (a species of bamboo). The royal household of Champa had begun from a boy found inside a bunch of areca-nuts. It was about notifying the people to respect the special space distancing the royal and priestly from the common, even more imaginative than using a spacecraft from Krypton from where Superman had come to planet Earth. The blood of Malay royalty was white. It must have been awesome. The *Adat* needed that intervention of the supernatural to root.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> W.G. Shellabear (1977). *Sejarah Melayu*. Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Fajar Bakti, pp. 18.

<sup>15</sup> M. Rajantheran (1999). *Sejarah Melayu, Kesan Hubungan Kebudayaan Melayu dan India*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, pp. 103-105.

<sup>16</sup> A. Ghani Ismail (2008). *Origin of the Malay and Asli – Part One*. Retrieved March 29 from [www.mycardinalpoint.blogspot.com](http://www.mycardinalpoint.blogspot.com).

Bat was the first to read the *ciri* (proclamation) and had the authority to install Sang Sapurba as Taramberi Teribuana, considered the first ruler of the Malay sultanates.

*“Syahdan, maka raja itupun digelar oleh Bat itu Sang Sapurba Taramberi Teribuana. Adapun Bat itulah daripadanya anak cucunya asal orang yang membaca ciri dahulukala. Maka Nila Pahlawan dan Kerisyna Pandita pun dikahwinkan Bat dengan Wan Empuk dan Wan Malini;”*<sup>17</sup>

Bat or Batala and his descendants are most likely Brahmin priests employed by the courts of Srivijaya in Palembang or other Hindu courts of the Malay Archipelago. Brahmins played an important role in safeguarding the honor and *sakti* (sacred power) of a king, besides acting as the court advisor, judge, keepers of customs and ceremonies, and *pujangga* (poet).<sup>18</sup> A king is not considered legitimate and sovereign unless installed by the *pujangga* or reader of the *ciri*. During the installation of a Srivijayan *raja*, the head of the Brahmin priest would act as the 'whisperer of the ruler's secret' and this custom is still practiced in Perak today. The only person entrusted to read the *ciri* and whisper the 'ruler's secret' into the ears of the new Sultan is Toh Seri Nara Diraja, who besides the nobat musicians, is an orang kalur, even considered the most prominent one. However, the Perak Toh Seri Nara has no relation to the Melaka Toh Seri Nara but to the Seri Bija Diraja.

The orang kalur could also be descendants of *suku asli* (indigenous peoples) tribes of Sumatera, such as the Suku Petalangan and Orang Talang Mamak. Singo Bono, a clan of the Suku Petalangan, was once entrusted by the rulers of Kampar to play the nobat during installation ceremonies. The Suku Petalangan were also sought after for their healing and shamanic practices. In return for their loyalty and services, the Suku Petalangan occupied

---

<sup>17</sup> W.G. Shellabear (1977), *op. cit.*, pp. 18-19.

<sup>18</sup> Mohd Taib Osman (1989). *Malay Folk Beliefs, An Integration of Disparate Elements*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, pp. 29.

high positions and honor in the kingdom.<sup>19</sup> The semi-nomadic Orang Talang Mamak were the only people allowed to play the nobat instruments of the Indragiri court in Rengat.<sup>20</sup> There are also stories told by at least one *orang asli* tribe in Malaysia claiming to be descendents of the orang muntah lembu from Sumatera.<sup>21</sup> Malay courts were known to employ the orang asli and *orang laut* (seafaring peoples) as loyal servants. However, Kartomi believes there is no connection between the orang muntah lembu of Semenanjung Malaysia and the Orang Talang Mamak of Riau (Kartomi, M., personal communication, April 14, 2009).

When Srivijaya started to weaken and losing its sovereignty to Majapahit, a prince named Parameswara moved to Temasek (now Singapore). After ruling the island for five years he moved northward to Melaka (again pressured by Majapahit) where he founded a new kingdom. As a royal prince, he was accompanied by a legion of followers including state nobilities, warriors and keepers of royal *adat istiadat*. In short, a political and administration system, including state customs and ceremonies were already in place when Melaka was founded as stated in the Sejarah Melayu. However, the function and relation of the orang muntah lembu to the system was not clear. The only link that can be made is between the post of Tok Seri Nara Diraja of Perak and Penghulu Bendahari of Temasek, known later as Seri Nara Diraja in Melaka, a post lower in rank to the Bendahara. Still, the question remains whether the duties of Tok Seri Nara Diraja of Perak and Batala in Palembang as readers of ciri and installers of rulers were performed by the Seri Nara Diraja of Melaka. The lineage of nobat musicians of Melaka was not mentioned in the Sejarah Melayu although the instruments and involvements of nobat in state functions were clearly stated.

---

<sup>19</sup> Turner, A. (1997). Cultural survival, identity and the performing arts of Kampar's suku Petalangan. *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde, Riau in transition 153 (1997), no: 4, Leiden*, pp. 655.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> A. Ghani Ismail (2008), *op. cit.*



During the reign of Sultan Muhammad Shah (1414-1444), the third Sultan of Melaka, a new post was created which involved the orang kalur. According to the Sejarah Melayu:

*“Adapun Seri Bija Diraja itu sedia asal Melayu, Tun Hamzah namanya, asalnya daripada Muntah Lembu; dipanggil orang Datuk Bungkok.”*<sup>22</sup>

Seri Bija Diraja was the fourth highest ranking official of the state after Bendahara, Penghulu Bendahari (Seri Nara Diraja) and Temenggung, before the existence of the post of Laksamana. Similar to Seri Nara Diraja, Seri Bija Diraja's role or level of involvement in Melaka's installation ceremonies was not known. It can only be assumed that as descendants of the orang muntah lembu, Seri Bija Diraja was surely involved in the installation of the Sultan. Nevertheless, the appointment of Tun Hamzah as one of Melaka's highest ranking official elevated the status of the orang kalur within the society. Up to the moment of Melaka's fall to the Portuguese in 1511, the post Seri Bija Diraja was filled by at least three members of a family, which were Tun Hamzah, his son Tun Kerutup and grandson Sang Setia Tetayan.

After Melaka was captured, Sultan Mahmud Shah moved to Kampar, Sumatera and died there in 1528. Two of his princes returned to the Malay Peninsula and founded the Johor-Riau and Perak sultanates. Sultan Muzaffar Shah, Perak's first sultan was installed in Tanah Abang according to the Melaka tradition. As the eldest prince of the last sultan of a great Malay empire, Sultan Muzaffar surely did not establish his kingdom without the support of his followers and customs inherited from Melaka. This included members of the royal family, state nobilities, articles of the royal regalia and the nobat orchestra including its players. Similar to Parameswara more than a century before, the state administration mechanism was already in place.

---

<sup>22</sup> W.G. Shellabear (1977), *op. cit.*, pp. 71.

Today, Seri Nara Diraja is one of the posts that have been maintained since the Melaka Sultanate although its duties have somehow changed. Although there is no Seri Bija Diraja in Perak, his lineage continues through Seri Nara Diraja, who, according to the late Allahyarham Toh Seri Nara Diraja Nong bin Chik followed Sultan Muzaffar Shah to Perak in 1528. He further stated that players of the Perak nobat, which are also orang kalur, however came directly from Melaka. According to Raja Kobat Salehuddin, intermarriages occurred between these two ‘classes’ of orang kalur over the years. Today, many orang kalur have moved out of their kampongs in Perak and are found all over the country. Many are highly educated with some holding high positions in the government. According to Toh Setia Guna Abdul Aziz<sup>23</sup>, there are about seven families of orang kalur left in Pulau Tiga, Perak (personal interview, December 24, 2006). Most of them are involved in agriculture and small cottage industries.



Toh Setia Guna Abdul Aziz Bin Hj. Yahya  
(Photograph by Raja Iskandar Raja Halid)

---

<sup>23</sup> ‘Toh Setia Guna’ is the title given to the leader of the nobat orchestra.

## **Training**

Since most of the musicians are sons of nobat players themselves, knowledge inevitably came from their fathers. However, Encik Abdul Aziz claims that although some players have thirty years of playing experience behind them, their skills are not necessarily passed down to their sons. He further complains that some even expect to be recruited as a nobat musician based merely on lineage and influence of their fathers (personal interview, December 24, 2006). Since a nobat player is accorded a fixed monthly income and pension, not to mention the honor and prestige that accompany it, it is hardly surprising that the job is hotly contested among young orang kalur and jealously guarded within a small family circle.

Learning starts at home, beginning with the basic rhythms of each of the 16 *ragam* or songs. Nengkara parts are taught first as it determines the tempo and carries the main rhythm of a song. These rhythms are first tapped on a table using fingers before actual instruments are used. The mnemonic 'tik' and 'tam' are used to represent the striking left and right hand. Once the nengkara rhythms are memorized, the *melalu* becomes easy since both plays in unison. Next comes the *peningkah*, which plays interlocking rhythms with the other two drums and clearly the most complicated. This is probably the reason why the peningkah players are only those closely related to Abdul Aziz – his brother and son – since more time is needed to train them. However, by the time they are employed, only less than half of the repertoire is memorized. Young boys are also occasionally exposed to performances and sometimes allowed to try out the instruments as Encik Azini, one of the serunai players recalls: “I used to follow my father and even played with the group before I was officially employed” (personal interview, November 24, 2006).

## *Saka*

Among rural Malays there is still a strong belief in guardian spirits called *saka baka* or simply *saka*. Also known as *hantu pusaka*, these spirits or *jin* are said to ‘guard’ or ‘look after’ families and is associated with a particular *ilmu* (knowledge) that is passed down from generation to generation. Saka is also known to help its ‘owner’ gain extraordinary physical strength, public influence, beauty and to instill fear in people’s hearts. *Ilmu pusaka* (inherited knowledge) allows the willing or unwitting (a person may unknowingly inherit a saka) successor to perform healing rituals, fortunetelling or *silat* (traditional Malay martial art) without really learning from anyone. When the Pawang Diraja (Royal Shaman) was asked where and when did he acquire his skills, the most powerful shaman in the state of Perak hesitantly answered that he didn’t really learn from anyone (R. Muhammad, personal interview, March 14, 2007). It’s hard to believe executing a job of his nature without proper training and knowledge, like a physician without going through medical school. Together with Toh Seri Nara Diraja and Toh Setia Guna, they are important figures in the running of royal istiadat at the Iskandariah Palace and inherit their present posts from their fathers. To be able to fill their fathers’ shoes means to be able to perform tasks which require certain skills and knowledge. This knowledge is either learned or simply ‘inherited’ and this ‘inherited knowledge’ come in the form of saka. Durkheim described this ancestral spirit as the genius that “expresses and personifies the powers of generation. But at the same time, he is the protector and director of particular individual to whose person he is attached.”<sup>24</sup>

*Mak Yong* practitioners in Kelantan and South Thailand acquire their skills through a similar saka known as *nenek moyang* (ancestors) which is a “specialized aspect of *semangat* that is a source of strength and guidance, motivation and inspiration, and a catalyst for

---

<sup>24</sup> Durkheim, E. ([1915] 1965). *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. New York: The Free Press, pp. 311.

performance.”<sup>25</sup> The orang kalur believe that their musical talents and special position within the royal institution are due to the ‘help’ of their saka. This belief – to a certain extent – does affect their overall behavior, and for the orang kalur, their music. Their reliance on the saka creates a false ‘sense of security’ and makes them more relaxed towards their profession, putting their playing skills and ability to memorize the lagu in a compromising situation. This problem is more evident among the younger generation of orang kalur aspiring to become royal musicians. A serunai player recalled how he was only ‘inspired’ to practice at dusk and was able to play even without really learning from his teacher (Azini, personal interview, December 24, 2006). However totally relying on saka for musical skills is not acceptable by Encik Abdul Aziz, who insisted that “...*takkan nak harapkan saka aje, kenalah belajar jugak...*” (you can’t rely totally on *saka*, you need to learn too) (personal interview, December 24, 2006).

Saka is inherited either knowingly or unknowingly. A son may express his willingness to accept a saka from his father and from that moment on, he owns one. Saka is also unsuspectingly inherited when accepting certain physical objects such as *keris*, *lembing* (spear) or musical instruments. Once inherited, the new ‘owner’ is thus guided by the saka (usually through dreams or strange happenings) on certain rituals to be performed or taboos avoided. For example, a disturbance was reported in the Nobat Room of the Selangor Palace because the yellow cloths used to cover the instruments were changed to a different fabric. From then on, it was understood that only cloths dyed with turmeric are acceptable by the saka (Hj. Lop Zahari, personal interview, November 24, 2006).

Saka is also said to ‘guide’ musicians during a performance. A player from the Selangor nobat recalls how he was ‘guided’ while playing the serunai and felt that he had lost control over the instrument (Hj. Lop Zahari, personal interview, November 24, 2006). The

---

<sup>25</sup> Fernando, J. S. (1996). *Lagu Menghadap Rebab in the Mak Yong Theatre of Kelantan and South Thailand: An Interpretive Musical Analysis*. MA Thesis, UM, pp. 83.

grandness and ‘eeriness’ of nobat’s music is often ascribed to the presence and guidance of the saka during the performances. This in turn is a manifestation of the saka’s strength and the Sultan’s daulat. The royal saka or state guardian genies are believed to inhabit the nobat instruments and other state regalia. In the old days, offerings were made to these instruments (or the spirits dwelling in them) in order to ‘please’ them and maintain a healthy ‘working relationship’ that would enable the state to be smoothly governed and protected. Like the Toba Batak of North Sumatera,<sup>26</sup> the orang kalur are also considered respectable shamans or *bomoh*, and to them, drums are not merely musical instruments but also as a means to communicate with spirits or supernatural beings.

The nobat orchestra, led by the Pawang Diraja, was also used in sacrificial ceremonies to cast away evil spirits and conciliate with the good ones. These elaborate rituals called *pelas* were done triennially under the commandment of the royal saka or spirits of the state to ensure good crop yields. Since the spirits of the districts are believed to be subservient to the spirits of the state, the Pawang Diraja himself was called upon to preside over the ceremonies. Seven rafts, which included among others, a slaughtered buffalo and the nobat orchestra, were floated downstream while the spirits of the districts passed were invoked to come and savor the feast.<sup>27</sup> The involvement of the nobat orchestra and the orang kalur in these ceremonies showed their importance in ensuring the wellbeing of the state. However, these elaborate rituals are no longer practiced today, except for the *memulih alat* (restoring the royal regalia), which is performed yearly and, clandestinely.

---

<sup>26</sup> Anon. (2007). *Drum (Musical Instrument)*. MSN Encarta Encyclopedia. Retrieved July 17, 2007 from <http://encarta.msn.com/encnet/refpages/RefArticle.aspx?refid=761570843>.

<sup>27</sup> Winstedt, R. O. ([1951] 1993). *The Malay Magician: Being Shaman, Saiva and Sufi*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, pp.67-68.

## Being a Royal Musician

The author remembers coming across a photograph of *arwah* Pak Hamzah<sup>28</sup> with his group taken somewhere in Europe, during a tour of the continent in the 70's. They were in full western suits with ties and dark glasses, and could easily have passed as a 'pop yeh yeh' group of the 60's. Far from being The Beatles wannabes, they were a traditional wayang kulit troupe from Tumpat, Kelantan, performing an ancient art form probably seen for the first time outside of Malaysia. However, amid the unassuming faces, you can't help but notice an aura of glamour and stardom emanating from the image. They may not have been famous pop superstars with a legion of adoring female fans, but superstars in their own world, the world of wayang kulit. *Dalang* (puppet master) Hamzah and his troupe were performers of "great skill and excellence known not only locally but nationally."<sup>29</sup> They were among the best, if not the best and they knew it.

On the contrary, the nobat orchestra of Perak may never get the chance to even perform outside of the state, let alone doing a tour of Europe. Once or twice a year, they would venture a few hundred meters outside the palace gate to perform at the Masjid Ubudiah in the mornings of Eid al Fitr or Eid al Adha or about a kilometer or two to accompany the lustration water taken from the Perak River bank for use in certain ceremonies. Only on extremely rare occasions they would perform in Taiping or as far as Kuala Lumpur. Competition with other nobat groups is nonexistent and a reputation as being among the best is totally unheard of. For a performing musician, besides monetary or other material rewards, the most gratifying and fulfilling forms of remuneration is the applause and adulation he or she gets from the audience. A musician enjoys playing his or her music as much as the audience enjoys listening to it. The experience of being admired and showered

---

<sup>28</sup> Well known *dalang* or puppet master from Kelantan, first recipient of *Anugerah Seniman Negara*, the country's highest honor for an artist.

<sup>29</sup> Matusky, P. (1993). *Malaysian Shadow Play and Music: Continuity of an Oral Tradition*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, pp. viii.

with praises for your musical ability, and the self-satisfying sense of achievement that follows, is – by any means – beyond measure. This is what drives the musician to further improve his or her skills, to be more creative and original, to be among the best.

For a nobat musician, except for a monthly salary, pension and probably a *pingat* (medal) if he ascends to the post of Toh Setia Guna, chances are, throughout his entire career, he will never hear a single clap from the audience. There will be no one coming over to the Balai Nobat after a performance to say “I love your second piece” or “great gendang improvisation.” Although the ‘other half’ of the bargain is missing, it does not in any way diminish their love and will towards their job. This lack of public appraisal may not be responsible for their lackadaisical attitude and restrictive behavior that shape the music, the inherent beliefs and taboos observed by the orang kalur, together with the nature and function of nobat music too play a part.

Professional musicians are often viewed with disdain in society. Merriam (1964) talks at length about the behavior of musicians and how in certain society such as the Basongye of Africa considers them as “lazy, heavy drinkers, debtors, impotents, physical weaklings, adulterers, and poor marriage risks.”<sup>30</sup> This negative perception towards professional musicians is not without basis, from Africa to the United States, studies have “tended toward confirmation of this behavior as a way of life” of musicians.<sup>31</sup> However, this cannot be said about the professional musicians of the Perak court. The orang kalur are viewed as normal, responsible and respected members of society, far from being outcasts known for some deviant behavior. Encik Abdul Aziz is a member of his mosque’s management committee, and would lead the ‘*Asar* prayers in the Balai Nobat prior to a performance. He and the rest of the orang kalur are observant Muslims, lead normal family lives and enjoy good earnings from their other sources of income.

---

<sup>30</sup> Merriam, A.P. (1964). *The Anthropology of Music*. Illinois: Northwestern University Press, pp. 136.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 137.



## Loyalty and Responsibility

The author was privileged enough to have witnessed performances by both Pak Hamzah and Pak Aziz with their respective groups. Although similar in many ways, wayang kulit and nobat are poles apart in terms of the musicians' behavior towards their performances. You won't find the trance-like fashion in which Pak Nasir improvises his gendang or the smiling face of Pak Ismail while playing the gong in Pak Hamzah's wayang kulit shows, in Pak Aziz's nobat performances. One is playing to entertain and the other plays to serve a much higher purpose – to serve a Sultan. More is at stake for nobat players because the wellbeing, honor and sanctity of the Sultan and State rest on their shoulders.

The Malays are known for the loyalty towards the Sultan or ruler, or any other *orang besar* (dignitaries). It is deeply enshrined in their psyche the concept of *setia* (loyalty) and *derhaka* (rebel or act of disobedience) through centuries of feudal rule influenced by the *devaraja* concept introduced by the Hindus. Wilkinson (1971) describes the Malay idea of loyalty:

It was a strange sentiment, this loyalty of the old Malays. A man might murder a hero or a saint, or betray a relative or friend, or abduct an innocent girl: if he did it in the interest of a royal intrigue, it was a noble act of self-sacrifice according to his ethical code.<sup>32</sup>

The orang kalur is the archetypical model of Malay loyalty of the Sultan. As loyal servants, they strictly abide by the rules and regulations of the palace pertaining to the performance of the nobat. They have to function like clock-work in every istiadat, both official and unofficial. However, they go beyond the master-slave relationship typical of any servant of the court. In fact, they are the court. The orang kalur is part and parcel of the institution that determines the validity and sanctity of the Sultan. Without them, the Sultan

---

<sup>32</sup> Wilkinson, R. J. (Ed.) (1971). *Papers on Malay Subjects*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, pp. 39.

simply does not exist! They pride themselves as being both the ‘elder brother’ of the Sultan and the herald entrusted to install the first Malay king at Bukit Siguntang, Sumatera. One of the players proudly remarked that his relatives were allowed to venture into the Iskandariah Palace compounds due to the fact that they are related to a musician of the palace (Azini, personal interview, March 17, 2007).

Being part of ‘royalty,’ they have to behave like royalty, as shown in the manner in which nobat is played – stately and controlled. As one of the main ‘actors’ in a ‘theater production’ called the *istiadat*, the nobat orchestra has to strictly follow and act upon the given ‘scripts’ and rehearsed gestures. It has to abide by the orderliness of the whole spectacle of wealth and power, of grace and divinity, manifested in the elaborate palace *istiadat*. The players wear finely tailored *baju melayu*, *samping* and *tengkolok*, directly facing the royal dais in a well balanced and symmetrical sitting and standing positions. They play with a level of seriousness and finesse depicting the ‘elevated’ realm they are in. As *orang kalur*, they are duty-bound to carry on with the tradition of playing for the Sultan, it’s not a matter of choice or whether they really enjoy playing (as a matter of fact, some of them do) but about upholding the family honor and trust bestowed upon them by the palace.

They are keepers of tradition. One early morning of Eid il-Adha, the nobat ensemble played in front of the Sultan’s room at the palace. Traditionally this was done to ‘wake’ the Sultan, accompanying his morning bath while ushering in the auspicious day. On that day however, the Sultan was away and there was nobody in the room. The same thing happens when the nobat is played in the Balai Nobat, instead of the rooftop of the palace when signaling the coming of Ramadan and the two Eid – the intended audience was not there. According to Toh Setia Guna Abdul Aziz, this has to be done “*seperti yang dulu-dulu*” (like before) just to continue with the tradition although it may look unnecessary or even absurd (personal interview, December 30, 2006). The *orang kalur* see themselves as not mere court

musicians but also important keepers of this tradition. The sounds of the nobat must be heard no matter what, even if it is only among the orang kalur since adat must be kept alive. This religious-like obedience and execution of tradition is closely related to the concept of daulat, where any form of disloyalty is considered derhaka and may result in 'divine wrath' or *tulah*. Like the strict adherence of *adat perpatih* in Negeri Sembilan, it's not just the result of the carrying out of the adat that matters but the impending consequences of its discontinuity that is more worrying.

### **Influence on the Music**

The loyalty of the orang kalur and strict adherence to the rules of the palace has an effect on the music of the nobat. Practice sessions are very seldom done at the palace since they are not allowed to roam freely there. Although traditionally the musicians practice at the Toh Setia Guna's house in Kg. Tanjung Bidara, Pulau Tiga, but this is rarely done lately due to logistical reasons. The only time when they can get together and practice is during unofficial ceremonies, such as the signaling of the coming of Ramadan, Eid-al Fitr and Eid-al Adha. This lack of practice resulted in many of the players (some with more than ten years' experience) not being able to master the repertoire. This is further aggravated by the fact that only certain selected lagu are played, even during unofficial ceremonies. Questions were also raised as to whether this is done on purpose (lack of practice at the palace) to keep the knowledge within a particular group of musicians (or a particular branch of the family), since one of the criteria for promotion is based on the ability of a player to master the repertoire (Shariffudin, personal interview, March 16, 2007). Even if there is a practice of nepotism, it is not bearing any fruit since none of the members of the present orchestra (other than the Toh Setia Guna) are fit to fill in the two top posts, including the most senior ones. Recently,

there have been suggestions from the Sultan's office that the orchestra practices at least once a month at the palace.

The music of the Perak nobat mirrors the subservient nature of the orang kalur towards not only their natural environment but more importantly their master – the Sultan. Their loyalty and strict adherence to tradition hinder them from exploring beyond the existing musical boundaries set by their forefathers. Any transgression may constitute an act of *derhaka* towards the Sultan which will in turn incur *tulah*. The absence of a standard or point of reference for the orchestra to gauge and improve their performance could be a reason for this state of musical inertia. There is no competition and audience response or appraisal to instigate a heightened state of musicianship and virtuosity. Another aspect is their reliance on *saka* as a source of guidance and inspiration, which in turn makes them rather lackadaisical and complacent. As long as this status quo is maintained, the music of the Perak nobat will remain as it is for many more generations to come.

Nevertheless, despite the ostensibly monotonous nature of its presentation, the music of the Perak nobat demonstrates a high degree of complexity in its organization. Behind this façade of uniformity and stillness, there are variations and elaborateness, quite different from other typical Malay traditional music such as *wayang kulit* or *mak yong*. The polyphonic nature of the music reflects both egalitarian and hierarchical social stratification utilized in its layering, yet, with an addition of a free, detached role played by the *serunai*. The interlocking ostinato parts of the two *gendang* embody the nature of traditional Malay social relations based on mutual cooperation and understanding. The *nengkara* signifies the sole ruler of a higher status, signaling the start and end of a piece, setting the tempo while leading and overseeing the orchestra. Although virtually trapped in time, oblivious of its changing environment, the music is ‘unconventional’ in many ways, especially the use of a variation of beat lengths and rhythms in the pieces. The Sultan’s divinely sanctioned rule and authority is

also aesthetically manifested in the uniformity, orderliness and symmetry in the arrangements of the music.

## **Epilogue**

Tradition – although many would like to think on the contrary – is constantly evolving; and through this process of evolution that it maintains its viability through time. The gamelan progresses with new compositions and arrangements, while new and more contemporary stories are imbued into wayang kulit performances. Both succumbs to the changing aesthetic needs of the audience, while still maintaining whatever that have been inherited. As a traditionally transmitted art form, nobat too evolves through time; however changes were made not due to pressure from audiences but through palace instructions. Although it is highly unlikely that nobat would be totally discarded in the near future, some of its uses and functions certainly will. In this regard, it is imperative that studies are conducted, in the hope that by studying and documenting the Perak nobat, will help to preserve this priceless heritage.

Today, only a handful of players in the ensemble memorize the whole repertoire, and there are contradictions among them as to the nature of their music. Information on the history and genealogy of the orang kalur is virtually nonexistent. Although knowledge is still being passed down using the rote system, the bulk of it is kept within a small family circle. A proper teaching method and syllabus can be developed to include the history and development of nobat and the orang kalur. Classes are open to all orang kalur regardless of age and it does not matter whether these students later end up as nobat musicians or not. This way, knowledge on nobat is passed down more systematically, thoroughly and evenly among the remaining families of the orang kalur. It will also ensure that the art form is kept alive within the community and encourages competition among aspiring musicians so that only the

best will serve the Sultan. It is hoped that the palace and relevant authorities would look into the matter before this art form disappears into the pages of history.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- Durkheim, E. ([1915] 1965). *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. New York: The Free Press.
- Fernando, J. S. (1996). *Lagu Menghadap Rebab in the Mak Yong Theatre of Kelantan and South Thailand: An Interpretive Musical Analysis*. MA Thesis, UM.
- Linehan, W. (1951) The Nobat and the Orang Kalau of Perak. *Journal of the Malayan Branch, Royal Asiatic Society*, 24, 3 (1951), 60-68.
- Matusky, P. (1993). *Malaysian Shadow Play and Music: Continuity of an Oral Tradition*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.
- Merriam, A.P. (1964). *The Anthropology of Music*. Illinois: Northwestern University Press.
- Mohd Taib Osman (1989). *Malay Folk Beliefs, An Integration of Disparate Elements*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- M. Rajantheran (1999). *Sejarah Melayu, Kesan Hubungan Kebudayaan Melayu dan India*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Neuman, D.M. (1977). The Social Organization of a Music Tradition: Hereditary Specialists in North India. *Ethnomusicology*, Vol. 21, No. 2. (May, 1977), pp. 233-245.
- Raja Noor Sheela Binti Raja Aziddin (1987). *Nobat Diraja Perak Darul Ridzuan*, Latihan Ilmiah, Kajian Senilukis dan Senireka, ITM.
- Sheppard, M. (1983). *Taman Saujana: Dance, Drama, Music, and Magic in Malaya, Long and Not-So-Long Ago*. Petaling Jaya: International Book Service.
- Skeat, W.W. ([1900] 2004). *Malay Magic: An Introduction to the Folklore and Popular Religion of the Malay Peninsular*. Kuala Lumpur: JMBRAS.
- Turner, A. (1997). Cultural survival, identity and the performing arts of Kampar's suku Petalangan. *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde, Riau in transition* 153 (1997), no: 4, Leiden.
- W.G. Shellabear (1977). *Sejarah Melayu*. Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Fajar Bakti.
- Wilkinson, R. J. (Ed.) (1971). *Papers on Malay Subjects*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.

Wilkinson, R. J. (2008). *Papers on Malay Subjects, Part I-IV*. Charleston: BiblioLife,  
Winstedt, R. O. ([1951] 1993). *The Malay Magician: Being Shaman, Saiva and Sufi*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.

### **Webpages**

A. Ghani Ismail (2008). *Origin of the Malay and Asli*. Retrieved March 28, 2009 from <http://www.mycardinalpoint.blogspot.com>.

Anon. (2002). *Hinduism's Online Lexicon*. Retrieved March 30, 2009 from <http://www.worldlibrary.net>.

Naoko Terauchi (2008). *World Arbiter 2009, Japanese Traditional Music*. Retrieved April 8, 2009 from <http://www.arbiterrecords.com>.