

Gambus Johor Sustainability: Issues and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

Identifying the issues and challenges faced by different parties, departments, and agencies throughout the process can help find solutions to solve these issues and challenges. Then, achieving the article's goal of sustaining the Gambus Johor musical instruments and music for future generations. The purpose of this article is to list out and discuss the issues and challenges of sustaining the Gambus Johor musical instrument and music faced by the radio stations, television stations, the government especially the Ministry of Tourism, Arts, and Culture, school authorities, and Ministry of Communications and Multimedia in Malaysia.

Keywords: *Gambus Johor sustainability, Gambus Johor, Issues, Challenges.*



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1. INTRODUCTION

Gambus Johor is known as one of the Malay musical instruments in Malaysia. Gambus Johor is a Malay version of an Arabic Oud. Arabic Oud is one of the famous musical instruments in the Middle East country such as Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Egypt. In Malaysia, this instrument is commonly played and manufactured in Johor. Nurnabilla (2013) said it is proven because when we talk about *gambus*, *Zapin* dance, or *Ghazal* music, people will straightly point at the Johor state. Indirectly, it became a symbol of art for the Malay community in Johor. Many Malay music genres that have Gambus Johor as one of the instruments in the music ensemble for example *zapin*, *ghazal*, and *samrah*. This instrument is categorized as a traditional musical instrument in Malaysia which is mostly played and manufactured by older practitioners. Although there are several music faculties from different universities and schools in Malaysia that already have Gambus Johor in their syllabus, they should also have plans to cultivate the interest of the students in the Gambus Johor playing for the future.

This effort can ensure that the student will appreciate and continue playing the instrument even after they graduated. Almost all the youngsters are more interested in playing western and modern instruments compared to the Malaysian traditional instruments. This issue may be due to the limited exposure of Gambus Johor music from radio and television stations in Malaysia as well as support from families, teachers, and responsible parties. These days, not many music composers in Malaysia use traditional musical instruments in their compositions compared before. This problem may be owing to present Malaysian composers' and educators' lack of knowledge of the playing skills utilized by traditional Malaysian musical instruments such as the Gambus Johor, *rebana*, and *rebab*. Other than that, most musician job positions are commonly required western or modern musical instruments only such as guitar, violin, piano, and cello.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Gambus Johor existed in Malaysia through the efforts of the old practitioners. They put their effort into making our traditional musical instruments according to the Arabic Oud shapes and designs that followed the Malaysian identity such as Malaysian heritage products, flora, and fauna. They craft, shape, and design the instrument to ensure that they can present the Malayness from the instrument's physical. There is also an effort from one of the luthiers in Johor that carve the instrument based on the flora and fauna motif in Malaysia such as black pepper. As said by Nurnabilla Binti Rosli (2013), there are other art elements from Arabia land Gambus *Samrah* and *Zapin* or *Zafe* dance accompanied by the *gambus* sound. Then, the elements are changed based on the Malay community's culture in *Batu Pahat*. It has also given a new breath of life to the community's progress of cultures and arts adapted in their life. *Gambus* became one of the traditional musical instruments that underwent a process of adaptation from Arab culture to the local culture. According to En. Halidan in his interview session with Sinar Harian (2022), he said "previously, the decoration of *gambus* was based on Arab influences, but I intend to produce *gambus* using motifs of flora and fauna in Malaysia as well as the identity of Johor such as black pepper". They also composed songs and music genres that are suitable to be played with the instrument. For the reasons above, we as new generations should never forget their effort and we have to make sure that this instrument can forever sustain as a traditional musical instrument in Malaysia. Besides that, we must also try to discover other suitable genres or repertoires that can be played on the instrument. In this way, we can introduce and highlight our traditional musical instruments in the eyes of the world to be known better by others.

We are considered lucky to live in a harmonious country that has many various races, ethnicities, cultures, heritages, and traditions. It is our responsibility to make sure that all the cultures and heritages in Malaysia did not lose in time so that all of it can be passed on to the next generation. It is not wrong if we want to learn and practice about other countries' heritages and cultures. It is not wrong if we want to learn and practice about other countries' heritages and cultures. But we have to always prioritize the heritages and cultures of our country first before others. In addition to that, there are a lot of challenges that the previous practitioners have to encounter in creating the heritage and culture that we have today. We also need to understand the history of the Malaysian heritage and cultural origin because those are the things that build our country's identity from then until now. Gambus Johor is one of the evidences of Islamization in Malaysia or also known as *Tanah Melayu* during that era. According to Muhammad Asyraf and Kamal Sabran (2021), the *gambus* is now known as Malaysia's "national musical instrument." Even though it is not a Malay word, *gambus* is today regarded as a part of the Malay culture. In Malaysia, *gambus* is also utilized as an instrument for the spread of Islam.

Malaysians will most probably think of Ramadhan (one of the months in the Islamic calendar) and *nasyid* when they heard the Gambus Johor sound which resembles the Arabic Oud's sound. The television and radio stations will use the sound of *gambus* when it is near the adhan (call of prayer for Islam) and during the month of Ramadhan. Based on Mohd Nizam Attan (2019) writing in his article, the sound of *gambus* itself is often associated with elements of 'Islam', for example, the radio before the call to prayer resounds will broadcast the sound of *gambus* quotes. Similarly, every time before the month of Ramadan, *gambus* melody songs will be regularly broadcast on the radio funnel. It is not easy to find any Gambus Johor and other traditional musical instruments' live performances except during Ramadhan or Raya events compared to modern and western instruments such as saxophone, guitar, drum, and violin. The physical structure of Gambus Johor is presented in Figure 1 courtesy of Encik Abdullah bin Mohd Redza's thesis entitled *A study of damar minyak and seraya as material for Gambus Johor soundboard*.

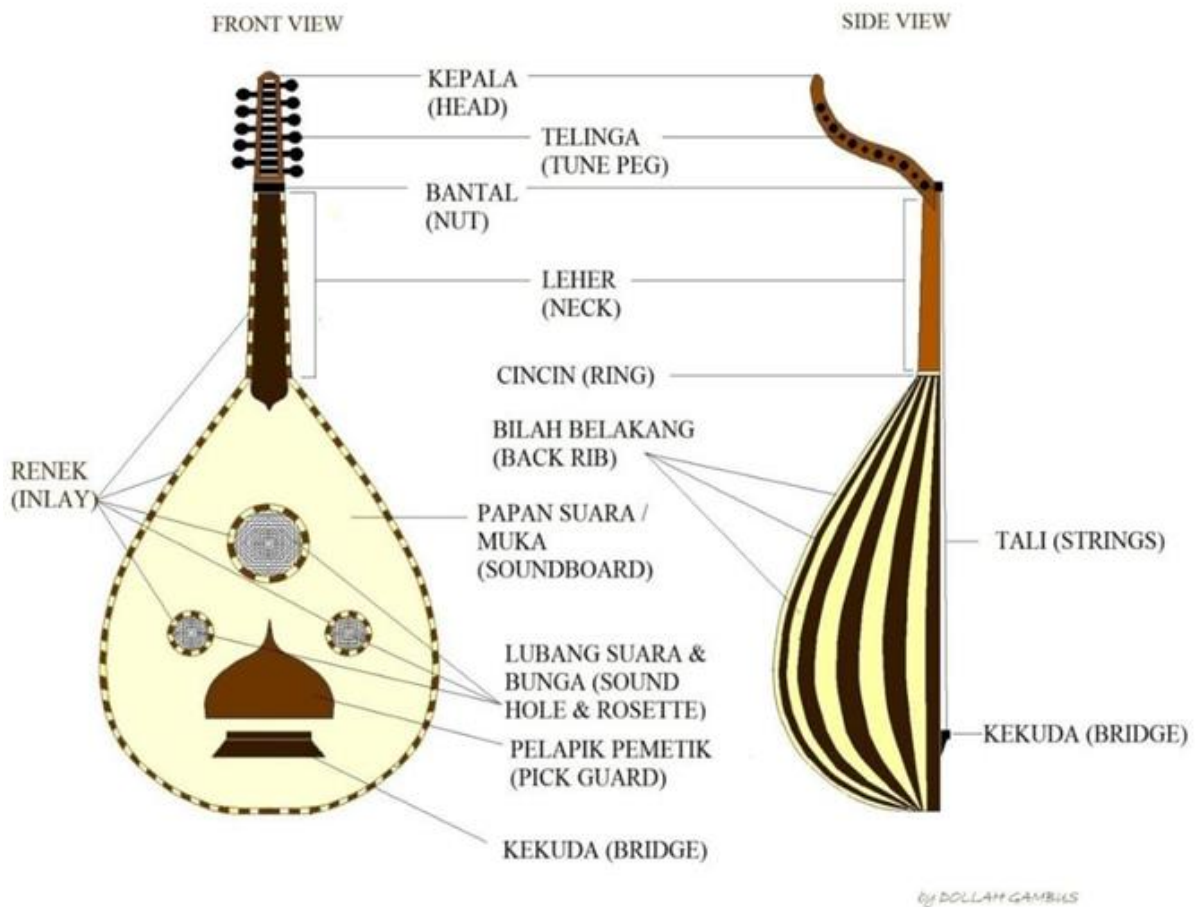


Figure 1. Physical structures of Gambus Johor
(Source: Abdullah, 2017, with Mr. Abdullah bin Mohd Redza's permission)

3. ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Gambus Johor is one of the important traditional instruments in Malaysia's history and identity. This instrument is mostly played in the Malaysian classical and traditional songs such as *zapin budi*, *bunga hati*, *sri mersing*, and *sri johor*. There are many positive outcomes that the player and the listener can gain from the Gambus Johor repertoires. Mohd Nizam Attan said in his interview session with Latifah Arifin (2015) in the *Berita Harian* newspaper, that despite the many elements of love in the *gambus* performance, the songs played are loaded with advice and can educate the community. However, this instrument is mostly played and manufactured by old practitioners rather than the younger generation in Malaysia. Other than that, there is a limited of information and documentation regarding the Gambus Johor instruments in English and Malay language. Larry Francis Hilarian (2005) backed up this claim in his essay "The Gambus (Lutes) of the Malay World", stating that very little has been published about the *gambus* or Malay music in either English or Malay language. As a result of this predicament, many Malaysians are still unaware of this Malaysian traditional instrument because there is not enough exposure to the Gambus Johor instrument and music.

There are several issues that need to be reviewed to develop success in sustaining the Gambus Johor instrument and music. All parties need to understand their respective responsibilities in making this effort a success. The parties in Malaysia that have to put initiatives on ensuring this traditional musical instrument and music stay relevant and not lost in time suggested by this article are radio stations, television stations, the government especially the Ministry of Tourism, Arts, and Culture, Malaysian school authorities, and the Malaysian Ministry of Communications and Multimedia. Radio and television stations in Malaysia have to plan the ways of highlighting the Gambus Johor musical instruments and music more than the modern and western musical instruments and music through their broadcast programs. Almost all Malaysians listen to the radio and watch television every day for different purposes. The Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture is in charge of promoting the uniqueness of Malaysian art, culture, and history as well as tourism products, as a key factor in the growth of the country's tourism and culture sector. School authorities act as early educators and give the experience to the students about the Gambus Johor instrument, music, and history. The Ministry of Communications and Multimedia is responsible for expanding and introducing Malaysian traditional musical instruments through multimedia, social media platforms, and online communication networks.

Nowadays, Malaysian citizens usually listen to radio stations that will only play popular songs that use modern and western musical instruments from Malaysia and internationally. Some examples of radio stations are Era FM, Sinar FM, Fly FM, and Hitz FM. One of the issues in sustaining the Gambus Johor instrument and music through the radio stations is there is less amount of Malaysians that will choose to appreciate and listen to the radio stations that play our Malaysian traditional music repertoires and classic songs such as Radio Klasik FM, especially the Malaysians that live in the city and modern life that are influenced by other countries, for example, the United States of America and South Korea. This situation also affects the choice of their interest in music genres. They tend to admire modern genres such as pop, hip hop, and jazz. It is challenging for the radio stations to have a plan on the methods to attract the Malaysian citizens mainly the younger generations to listen to and enjoy our traditional and classic music. As said by Alena Murang in her interview session with Chee Seng (2016) on the "Cilisos" website, she is rational enough to know that traditional arts cannot stay the same forever. Traditional music, for example, is no longer popular since most people find it to be extremely boring. As the Malay proverb says, "*belum cuba, belum tahu*". It means we would not know about something if we did not try it first.

For television stations, there are fewer programs broadcast about the Malaysian traditional instruments' history and music on their television channels compared to the drama series, entertainment programs, and reality shows. Most of the drama series produced by Malaysia today is about love conflicts. Apart from that, entertainment programs and reality shows in Malaysia mostly focus on entertainment only and no longer highlight the culture and heritage of Malaysia. One of the most popular music competitions on television which is *Anugerah Juara Lagu* used to have traditional instruments on stage as the background music but during this era, there are fewer songs that use traditional instruments as the background instrumentations. However, during *Anugerah Juara Lagu* 35 different composers composed two songs entitled "*Eh*" and "*7 Nasihat*" and successfully presented the Malaysian traditional instruments back on stage as the background music for the songs in the program during the competition. Both songs composed consist of Malaysian traditional musical instruments and modern musical instruments. The instrument that has been used in the "*Eh*" song is a bamboo flute and there are two instruments that have been used in the "*7 Nasihat*" song on stage which are Gambus Johor and also bamboo flute. The musician for the Gambus Johor is none other than our famous female *gambus* player, Mrs. Fauziah Gambus. This is one of the great initiatives of the Malaysia television station and composers on popularizing our traditional instruments playing in a contemporary genre of music.

There is still a shortage in the number of exhibitions, workshops, talks, and competitions that includes the Malaysian traditional instruments organized by the Ministry of Tourism, Arts, and Culture. This effort can attract more potential players and makers of Gambus Johor instruments from Malaysia and other countries with a great attempt at publicity. There are numerous departments and agencies under the Ministry of Tourism, Arts, and Cultures that should take part on commercialize our traditional instruments and music such as the National Department of Culture and Arts, Department of National Heritage, National Academy of Arts Culture and Heritage, Malaysian Handicraft Development Corporation, and *Istana Budaya*. According to the Deputy Director General (Operations) Malaysian Craft, Aididah Ibrahim during the Langkawi Craft Musical Festival 2021, Initiatives to promote and commercialize local Malaysian musical instrument craft products can increase public knowledge and awareness of Malaysian craft products. In addition to that, commercializing the product can indirectly popularize the use of craft products in the art and cultural performances of national heritage. (Nurul Husna Mahmud, 2021) Some of the Gambus Johor programs that are organized by the Ministry of Tourism, Arts, and Culture are Program *Bicara Gambus* 2008, National Gambus Festival 2013, Festival *Gambus Serantau* 2015, *Pertandingan Gambus Solo dan Rupa Bentuk Gambus* 2015, Gambus Festival 2018, and *Maqam dan Taksim dalam permain Gambus* 2021. The challenge faced by the Ministry of Tourism, Arts, and Culture Malaysia is a strategy to attract Malaysians with traditional instruments and music. In addition, several challenges need to be faced by Malaysian traditional musical instrument makers in producing high-quality musical instruments that can be marketed in Malaysia and other countries. This is because they do not have enough machine equipment and tools as well as quality materials to prepare the musical instruments.

In Malaysia, almost all of the popular music academies, for example, Bentley, Yamaha, and *Capen* music academies did not provide Malaysian traditional instrument classes at their academy. Hence, the traditional music players in Malaysia have fewer job opportunities compared to other types of musical instruments and it is challenging for the Gambus Johor players to survive as full-time musicians. Most of the Gambus Johor players usually perform at events and special occasions only such as weddings, engagements, and Islamic events, and during Ramadhan and *Hari Raya Aidilfitri* occasions. Other than that, there are limited primary and secondary schools in Malaysia that have Gambus Johor in their music education syllabus or music club in their school. This situation did not just affect the Gambus Johor players but it also affected the Gambus Johor luthiers in Malaysia. If schools started to include the Gambus Johor musical instruments, this could be an opportunity for the luthiers to remain in this field by providing the Gambus Johor instrument for the school's education. Early exposure to the traditional instruments and music can also build the student's interest and thus, sustain the Gambus Johor for future generations. Mohammad Haris Abd Azis (2021) in his article believes the education system needs to play a role in unearthing talent and producing creative and innovative human capital that can contribute to the development of the Malaysian Creative Industry in the future. This is because the ability of the country to become a producer of creative cultural arts products in the world and the future is depending on the concern of the country's education system that can produce a quality creative industry workforce today.

The Ministry of Communications and Multimedia is responsible for helping the growth of the country's creative industry including the music field. They also need to prove that Malaysian traditional musical instruments can compete with modern and western musical instruments. Malaysian Minister of Communications and Multimedia, Tan Sri Annuar Musa thinks that the development of the country's creative industry can be accelerated by strengthening the industry first. He also said the effort could be achieved by leveraging Malaysia's creativity and digital technology while preserving the country's invaluable culture, arts, and heritage. (*Sinar Harian*, 2021). With the passage of time moving fast nowadays is a challenge on the part of the Ministry of Communications and Multimedia Malaysia in highlighting the Malaysian traditional heritage more compared to other countries' heritage. One of the challenges that need to be faced by the Ministry of Communications and Multimedia in raising the name of the country's creative industry to be known to many is the fast-moving passage of time and increasingly advanced technology. Composers, musicians, and luthiers in Malaysia should be more creative and give a new idea on presenting Malaysian traditional instruments and music. This statement is supported by Mohammad Haris Abd Azis (2021) in his article entitled, "*Seni dan budaya tradisi perlu anjakan paradigma*". He said the sustainability of Malaysian traditional art must always be a priority. This effort must also go beyond the norm to ensure that it is more versatile. Hence, the performance and promotion techniques must be innovative to be present to this decade's generations. However, there are issues from a different perspective regarding this topic. As said by Mohammad Haris Abd Azis (2021) in his article, there are cynical views and criticism from those who evaluate the art of the tradition from the point of view of finesse and heritage value if this art is presented with a concept different from its originality. It is also seen as oblique if presented in a contemporary manner with various techniques and the latest technological support.

4. CONCLUSION

There can be no doubt that almost all traditional musical instruments and music in Malaysia are facing extinction due to modernization and the change in the lifestyle of Malaysian citizens. However, we have to remember that it has been our duty to ensure the sustainability of Gambus Johor as well as other musical instruments and traditional music in Malaysia known and practiced by future generations. To achieve this goal, all parties must participate and work as a team. Furthermore, history has proven that traditional arts and culture played an important role in the development of civilization as in the Romans and Greeks for example, especially in the formation of Italy and Greece as countries that have their own identity. Thus, we must always appreciate and feel proud of our cultures and heritage. As a result, depending on the issues and challenges encountered, further planning is needed to enhance Gambus Johor instruments and music in the future. It is indeed crucial to figure out proper ways of dealing with the issues and challenges faced by different authorities, departments, agencies, and parties that occur along the process. Once the issues and challenges are solved, it will lead to brighter prospects for the Gambus Johor musical instruments and music. The methods and processes of sustaining the Gambus Johor can also be applied to other traditional musical instruments and music.

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Sekian, terima kasih.

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Saya yang menjalankan amanah,

Setuju.

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