

The Origins of the *Gambus* (‘*ūd*’) in Malaysia: A Two-Channel Hypothesis of Ottoman Cultural Exchange and Hadrami Diaspora

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Abstract

The history of the *gambus* in Malaysia has long been framed through a “trade-route diffusion” model, which assumes Arab merchants introduced the instrument to Melaka as part of Indian Ocean exchange. While widely repeated, this narrative is speculative and unsupported by concrete organological or archival evidence. This study distinguishes between the Yemeni *qanbūs*—a shallow, slightly bowled lute—and the large-bodied, fretless, deep bowl-backed lute known in Malaysia as *gambus*. The latter is structurally consistent with the Ottoman and wider Arabic ‘*ūd*’ tradition, although regional variants (Turkish, Arabic) are acknowledged. To avoid conflation, the article decouples instrumental history from performance practice. The dance tradition locally known as *zapin* (Arabic: *zaḥfīn*), characterised by rhythmic footwork, call-and-response singing, and devotional associations, likely entered the Malay world via Hadrami diaspora networks from the 16th century onwards. By contrast, the instrument paired with it resembles Ottoman/Arabic ‘*ūd*’ models and plausibly arrived through channels of cultural diplomacy, gift exchange, and elite circulation in the 16th to the 18th centuries. This two-channel hypothesis—Hadrami-led transmission of performance practice, Ottoman-linked transmission of the instrument—presents a historically grounded alternative to the trade-route narrative. It reframes the *gambus* tradition as hybrid: socially Hadrami, structurally Ottoman-Arabic, and culturally localised within Malaysia’s musical heritage.

Keywords: *gambus*, Hadrami diaspora, organology, Ottoman diplomacy, *zapin* (*zaḥfīn*)

Introduction: A Historical Disjunction

The origins of the *gambus* in Malaysia have often been narrated through a familiar storyline: Arab traders sailing across the Indian Ocean into Melaka introduced the instrument alongside Islam, textiles, and spices. This “trade-route diffusion model” is attractive for its simplicity and its resonance with well-documented histories of Indian Ocean commerce (Hilarian, 2003; Reid, 1993; Ricklefs, 2008). In this telling, Hadrami merchants or itinerant preachers are said to have carried the *qanbūs*, a short-necked lute from Yemen, to the Malay Peninsula, where it became embedded in local performance traditions.

Much of the existing scholarship, along with accessible overviews for broader readerships, has presented this Hadrami-trader narrative as the primary pathway for both instrument and performance practice (see, for instance, Raja Zulkarnain & Attan, 2025). The present study, however, interrogates that assumption and distinguishes between performance and instrumental transmission, setting up a two-channel account developed below.

While the Hadrami-trader diffusion narrative fits neatly within popular histories, it falters under closer ethnomusicological and organological scrutiny. In the Malaysian context where the *gambus* has had its most enduring presence (Johor, Penang, and Sabah), the instrument in use is not a *qanbūs*. Instead, it displays the morphological hallmarks of the fretless, bowl-backed *ūd* family: deep ribbed resonator, bent-back pegbox, multiple string courses, and ornate rosettes (Raja Zulkarnain, 2013; 2017). Scholars differ in terminology, with “Ottoman,” “Arabic,” and “classical Arabic” *ūd* used to describe regional variants that share common structural principles but differ in dimensions and timbre. In this study, I use “Ottoman/classical Arabic *ūd*” to denote this wider bowl-backed lineage, while acknowledging differences between Turkish and Arabic models.

This distinction—between the Yemeni *qanbūs* and the bowl-backed *ūd*-type *gambus* used in Malaysia—reveals a core contradiction: how did a performance tradition so clearly tied to the Hadrami diaspora come to be paired with an instrument more closely aligned with Ottoman-Arabic morphology? To resolve this puzzle, I propose a two-channel hypothesis. The first channel concerns the Hadrami diaspora and its cultural influence across the Indonesian archipelago, which carried the dance-song complex known locally as *zapin* (Arabic: *zafin*) into the Malay world. Sources suggest that Hadrami networks were present in Sumatra and Java from the 15th to the 16th centuries (Azra, 2004; Ho, 2006), making it plausible that *zapin* entered the peninsula earlier than often acknowledged, although its courtly institutionalisation in Johor appears to have taken shape more fully in the 19th century (Alatas, 2011). The second channel concerns the Ottoman Empire’s symbolic and strategic ties with Southeast Asia, most notably with Aceh in the 16th and 17th centuries (Casale, 2010; Faroqhi, 2005; Gallop, 2015). These interactions involved envoys, military appeals, and ceremonial gift exchanges, in which musical instruments functioned as cultural emblems. While no surviving archival record explicitly documents the gifting of an *ūd* to a Malay ruler, the organological match between surviving Malaysian *gambus* and Ottoman/Arabic *ūd* strengthens the plausibility of this route. A preliminary form of this argument was outlined in Raja

Zulkarnain (2024) and is elaborated here with expanded organological and historical framing.

The convergence of these two channels—Hadrami performance practice and Ottoman-Arabic instrumental culture—provides a historically grounded explanation for the hybrid tradition observed today. It challenges the dominance of the trade-route model, which has relied more on repetition than evidence, and reframes the *gambus* in Malaysia as the outcome of overlapping transmissions across interconnected Islamic worlds. This approach also underscores the need for multidisciplinary verification, combining ethnomusicology, material culture, diaspora studies, and archival research to refine the chronology and mechanisms of this convergence.

Instrumental Realities: ‘*Ūd* or *Qanbūs*?

A close examination of the instrument known in Malaysia as *gambus* reveals a morphology far removed from the Yemeni *qanbūs*, despite the persistence of the assumption (often stated as if self-evident) that the two are equivalent. The *qanbūs*, historically used in Yemen and among Hadrami communities abroad, is a short-necked lute with a small pear-shaped or trapezoidal resonator and a shallow carved back, often described as flat but in fact slightly convex (Da‘ud, 2005; Hood, 1982). Its body is typically carved from a single block of wood, resulting in a lightweight instrument suited to portability and intimate performance. In many documented variants, the neck carries tied gut or nylon frets that create fixed pitch intervals; in others, the instrument is fretless, which allows for greater flexibility. Standard stringing involves four single strings, sometimes paired into courses, tuned to the *ṣan‘ānī* repertoire and other regional genres (al-Faruqi, 1985; Da‘ud, 2005; Rouget, 1985; Stokes, 1994).¹ Tonally, the *qanbūs* is bright and percussive, with a quick decay that suits syllabic vocal styles. Scholars such as Hilarian (2003) have also noted its capacity for melodic elaboration within Yemeni traditions and caution against reducing it to purely rhythmic support.

By contrast, Malaysian *gambus* instruments, whether from Johor, Penang, or Sabah, display the defining morphology of the wider ‘*ūd* family: a deep ribbed bowl resonator, fretless neck, sharply bent pegbox, and one to three rosettes (During, 1991; Shiloah, 1995). Typically strung with five or six double courses, these instruments provide greater sustain and harmonic richness than the *qanbūs*. (Here I use the term “Ottoman/classical Arabic ‘*ūd*” to describe this bowl-backed

¹ *Ṣan‘ānī* (or *sana‘ani*) refers to the urban sung-poetry tradition of Yemen’s capital, Ṣan‘ā’. Performed historically with the *qanbūs* lute and later the ‘*ūd*, it features strophic poetic settings (*qaṣīda*), cyclical rhythmic frameworks, and call-and-response textures. The *qanbūs*’s four-string configuration fits this repertoire’s concise melodic range and percussive style, and it gives the declamation of verse its characteristic syllabic clarity. For discussions of *ṣan‘ānī* and its performance practice, see al-Faruqi (1985), Rouget (1985), Da‘ud (2005), and Stokes (1994).

lineage, acknowledging that Turkish and Arabic variants differ in dimensions, stringing, and timbre but share a structural core absent in the Yemeni *qanbūs*.)

From a performance standpoint, the structural distinction between the *qanbūs* and the *ūd*-type *gambus* is significant. The fretless *ūd* design supports microtonal inflections central to *maqām* practice; this feature enables melodic flexibility that complements ensemble as well as solo roles. Its longer sustain allows the *gambus* in Malaysia to provide both rhythmic grounding and melodic elaboration in *zapin* contexts. This is not to deny the melodic potential of the *qanbūs*, but rather to emphasise that the Malaysian instrument derives from a different lineage that privileges modal ornamentation and extended resonance.

In my earlier publications (Raja Zulkarnain, 2013; 2017), I presented visual documentation of both the *ūd* and *qanbūs* to demonstrate their divergent construction. Comparative organological evidence further shows that the Malaysian *gambus* corresponds closely to Ottoman- and Arabic-era examples preserved in Istanbul and Cairo (Wright, 1978), rather than to Yemeni prototypes. This suggests not a transplanted Hadrami artefact but a regional adoption of the bowl-backed *ūd*, likely introduced through diplomatic or elite exchange.

In short, the evidence indicates a historical trajectory distinct from the Hadrami-derived performance tradition. Whereas *zapin* (Arabic: *zafīn*) entered through diaspora networks, the form of the Malaysian *gambus* reflects affinities with the broader Ottoman-Arabic *ūd*. This reinforces the two-channel hypothesis proposed in this study: Hadrami performance, Ottoman-Arabic instrument.



Figure 1. Comparative morphology of three lute types relevant to Malaysian *gambus* traditions. From left to right: 1) Yemeni *qanbūs* (shallow carved back, sometimes fretted, short-necked [Photograph by author, 2006]);² 2) Ottoman/classical Arabic *'ūd* (deep bowl-backed, fretless, multi-course [Image source: Public Domain]); and 3) Malaysian *gambus* (structurally aligned with the *'ūd* but socially tied to Hadrami performance [Photograph by author, 2025]).

The Hadrami Diaspora: *Zafin*, Song, and Ritual Transmission

By the 14th and 15th centuries, Islamic polities and coastal communities in northern Sumatra, such as Samudera-Pasai and later Aceh, were already firmly established (Ricklefs, 2008; Reid, 1993). The process of Islamisation, while uneven, accelerated during the 15th and 16th centuries and radiated through the Indonesian archipelago via trade, intermarriage, and religious teaching. Within this broader expansion, Hadrami mobility emerged as one of the most enduring transoceanic phenomena, binding Southeast Asia into a far-reaching web of kinship, scholarship, and commerce (Azra, 2004; Ho, 2006; Mobini-Kesheh, 1999).

From the 15th to the 17th centuries, the Hadrami diaspora's influence in maritime Asia was strengthened by its integration into religious networks linking ports such as Aden, Mukalla, and al-Shihr to hubs in Gujarat, Malabar, Aceh, and Java. Migration was rarely one-way: many Hadramis circulated between homelands and overseas settlements, and this pattern created multi-generational circuits of

² During field observation at the 2nd Muscat Oud Festival in 2006, I examined a Yemeni-built *qanbūs* that was fretless, carved from a single block of wood. This example illustrates that fret use is not universal across all *qanbūs*, which points to diversity in construction practices.

mobility. This pattern persisted into the 18th and 19th centuries, sustained by economic activity, religious authority, and intermarriage with local elites.

One of the critical mechanisms for maintaining these connections was the pilgrimage (*hajj*), which not only facilitated movement between Southeast Asia and Arabia but also served as a conduit for transmitting religious texts, ritual forms, and performative arts (Tagliacozzo, 2013). In this way, the Hadrami diaspora was not merely a trading network but also a vehicle for embodied cultural practices adaptable to diverse local contexts.

Among the most enduring of these performative traditions is *zapin* (Arabic: *zafin*), a stylised musical-dance form that is both socially vibrant and symbolically charged. *Zapin* combines synchronised group footwork, performed in straight or slightly curved lines, with rhythmic clapping or percussion accompaniment (typically frame drums [*rebana*] or hand drums [*marwas*]). Vocals are delivered through call-and-response exchanges between a lead singer (*penyanyi utama*) and chorus to create a participatory dynamic (Alatas, 2011). In Hadrami and Indonesian contexts, *zapin* appears in weddings, circumcisions, festivals, and sometimes devotional gatherings (*mawlid*); in these settings, it connects festivity with moral and spiritual values.

In Malaysia, *zapin* most likely entered through multiple routes. Eastern Indonesian and coastal Sumatran hubs such as Palembang, Pontianak, and Makassar functioned as cultural relay points, where Hadrami leaders and musicians interacted with local populations. At the same time, direct maritime contact with Melaka, especially from the 15th to the 16th centuries, would also have provided a possible entry channel. What seems clear is that by the 16th century, *zapin* had already reached the Malay Peninsula. Its subsequent localisation in Johor, particularly during the 19th century, reflects not initial arrival but rather its formal institutionalisation in court and community performance, where Malay poetic forms (*pantun*, *syair*) were incorporated and movement adapted to regional aesthetics. By the late 19th century, *zapin* was firmly embedded in Johor's cultural identity and had also taken root in Penang and parts of Borneo, including what is now the East Malaysian state of Sabah.

Yet, while the musical structure, dance formation, and social context of *zapin* in Malaysia point unmistakably to Hadrami influence, the primary melodic instrument paired with it—the *gambus*—is not of Hadrami origin. Organologically, the Malaysian *gambus* is a fretless, bowl-backed lute that corresponds more closely with the Ottoman-Arabic *ūd* than with the shallow-backed *qanbūs* of Yemen. This presents a fundamental disjunction: a Hadrami-derived performance form accompanied by an instrument that does not belong to the Hadrami lineage.

This mismatch indicates the need to treat musical function (what is performed) and instrumental form (what it is performed on) as historically distinct phenomena. While *zapin* entered Malaysia through Hadrami migratory and religious flows, the *ūd*-type instrument with which it became associated appears to have arrived through an entirely separate channel: Ottoman cultural diplomacy and elite exchange. The meeting of these two elements in Malaysian performance practice is

thus best understood not as a single transmission event, but as a later synthesis of parallel currents.

By recognising this bifurcated history, scholars can more accurately reconstruct the emergence of Malaysia's *gambus* tradition—not as a monolithic import from one source, but as a layered cultural product shaped by centuries of interwoven diaspora and diplomacy.

Ottoman Cultural Diplomacy: Elite Exchange and Symbolic Instruments

While the Hadrami diaspora provides a convincing framework for the arrival of the *zāpin* performance complex in the Malay world, it does not adequately explain the *ūd*-type instrument that eventually became central to Malaysian *gambus* traditions. Organological analysis shows that the Malaysian *gambus*, with its deep multi-ribbed bowl, fretless neck, bent-back pegbox, and ornate rosettes, belong not with the Yemeni *qanbūs* but with the wider family of bowl-backed *ūds*. Within this family, Ottoman/Turkish and Arabic variants differed in size, timbre, and detailing, yet shared core constructional principles absent from the *qanbūs*. The resemblance suggests that the Malaysian *gambus* belongs to this broader *ūd* lineage.

Aceh-Ottoman Relations and the Indian Ocean Context

Documentary evidence places the earliest Aceh-Ottoman diplomatic contact in the 1560s, when Aceh sought military and symbolic support against the Portuguese (Casale, 2010; Gallop, 2015). This was during a period in which the Ottoman Empire extended its maritime presence across the Red Sea, Persian Gulf, and Indian Ocean (İnalçık, 1994). Although Ottoman priorities were primarily securing pilgrimage routes and countering Portuguese expansion, their regional engagements created openings for cultural and diplomatic exchange, including the circulation of prestige goods.

The Role of Symbolic Gifts in Diplomacy

As Faroqhi (2005) notes, Ottoman diplomacy relied heavily on ceremonial gift-giving to signal political alliances, religious solidarity, and cultural refinement. Alongside weapons, textiles, and manuscripts, musical instruments associated with courtly and Sufi traditions also circulated in these exchanges. Instruments such as the *ūd*, emblematic of refinement and Islamic cosmopolitanism, would have been particularly resonant as diplomatic gifts.

The *Ūd* as a Cultural Emblem

In the Ottoman and Arabic worlds, the *ūd* served not only as an instrument but also as a cultural emblem. Central to court ensembles, Sufi devotional practice, and urban entertainment, the *ūd* embodied artistic sophistication and spiritual resonance. The gifting of such an instrument to a Southeast Asian ruler would have communicated prestige, cultural legitimacy, and inclusion in the symbolic sphere of

the Caliphate. For courts in Aceh, Johor, or Brunei, receiving an *ūd* would have enhanced their authority by linking them visually and sonically to the Islamic heartlands.

Previous Research and Organological Parallels

This interpretation of the *ūd* as a symbol of cultural diplomacy and Islamic legitimacy builds on my earlier work (Raja Zulkarnain, 2024) and complements broader scholarship on the *gambus* (e.g., Hilarian, 2003). Malaysian *gambus* instruments display structural features (i.e., deep bowl, multi-course stringing, carved rosettes) that correspond to Ottoman- and Arabic-era examples preserved in Istanbul and Cairo (Wright, 1978). These similarities suggest transmission through elite channels rather than through Hadrami *qanbūs* traditions.

Converging Evidence and Historical Plausibility

Although no archival record explicitly documents the gifting of an *ūd* to a Malay ruler, multiple strands of evidence make the hypothesis plausible:

1. Historical contact: Southeast Asian courts cultivated Ottoman ties from the 16th to the 18th centuries, with Aceh as a key intermediary.
2. Symbolic value: The *ūd* held prestige within Ottoman and Arabic diplomatic culture as a marker of refinement and Islamic solidarity.
3. Material correspondence: Surviving Malaysian *gambus* instruments bear closer morphological resemblance to Ottoman-Arabic *ūd* models, not Yemeni *qanbūs*.

Taken together, these factors point to elite cultural exchange as a likely channel for the arrival of the *ūd* in the Malay world. That the instrument came to be called *gambus Hadhramaut* reflects not its morphology but its association with Hadrami-led *zapin* performance—naming practices followed diaspora identity rather than constructional lineage. The perspective advanced here reframes the Malaysian *gambus* not as a derivative of the Yemeni *qanbūs*, but as the outcome of intersecting transmissions (i.e., Hadrami in performance, Ottoman-Arabic in instrument) woven into the socio-musical fabric of the Malay world.

The Name *Gambus*: Linguistic Continuity and Functional Association

If the Malaysian *gambus* is structurally consistent with the Ottoman/classical Arabic *ūd*, why does it carry a name historically associated with the Hadrami *qanbūs*? The answer lies in the way instruments are often named in diaspora contexts, that is, not strictly by their morphology or place of manufacture, but by their cultural role, social associations, and functional meanings within a community.

From *Qanbūs* to *Gambus*: Phonetic and Semantic Shifts

In Yemen, the term *qanbūs* (قنبس) refers to a small, shallow-backed lute that occupies a central place in Hadrami musical life. As Hadrami communities migrated into the Indonesian archipelago and Malay Peninsula from the 15th century onwards, the name underwent both phonetic adaptation and semantic broadening.

Phonetically, the initial cluster *qn-* is uncommon in Malay phonology. Its substitution with *g-* and the smoothing of consonant transitions reflect natural loanword nativisation, producing the Malay form *gambus*. Such reshaping is common in diaspora vocabulary, where imported terms adapt to local sound systems while preserving symbolic associations (Haspelmath & Tadmor, 2009; Mobini-Kesheh, 1999).

Functional Naming and Cultural Memory

The shift from *qanbūs* to *gambus* also reflects functional naming. In the Malay world, the label *gambus* signified “Arab” or “Islamic” music-making, regardless of instrument morphology. Thus, the name could apply to different plucked lutes so long as they fulfilled the same cultural role. This phenomenon is not unique: in North Africa, *ūd* *arbī* designates local lutes distinct from Middle Eastern *ūd* but linked to Arab identity (Shannon, 2006). In the Caribbean, *cuatro* refers to diverse small guitars unified by cultural function rather than standardised form.

Regional Variations within Malaysia and Borneo

In Johor, *gambus* came to denote the large-bodied, fretless lutes used in *zapin* ensembles, structurally akin to the Ottoman/classical Arabic *ūd*, yet socially tied to Hadrami performance heritage. In Sabah and Brunei, by contrast, *gambus* referred to locally made instruments closer to the *qanbūs* in shape and size, often with regional adaptations such as smaller soundboxes or indigenous decorative motifs. These localised forms illustrate how makers preserved diasporic identity while accommodating local aesthetics, materials, and performance needs.

Naming as Cultural Assimilation

When the bowl-backed *ūd* entered the Malay world, most likely through Ottoman-Arabic diplomatic channels, it was absorbed into the already familiar category of *gambus*. For musicians and audiences, the Hadrami-associated name anchored the instrument in established *zapin* traditions. The morphological differences between the *ūd* and the *qanbūs* were of little consequence in popular imagination; what mattered was the instrument’s role in socially and ritually significant contexts.

This is why the instrument was never called “Gambus Ottoman”: naming practices reflected diasporic memory and cultural association, not organological taxonomy. The Hadrami identity of *zapin* performance framed how the instrument was perceived and labelled.

Implications for the Two-Channel Hypothesis

Understanding this naming process is crucial to the two-channel hypothesis. It shows that the instrument's Ottoman-Arabic lineage and its Hadrami-associated name are not contradictory but complementary. The continuity of the name *gambus* ensured cultural familiarity, while the morphology of the *ūd* indicates a distinct historical pathway of introduction. Together they exemplify how diaspora communities reconcile new material influences with inherited frameworks to create hybrid traditions that are both innovative and deeply rooted in identity.

A Two-Channel Hypothesis

The contradictions observed in the Malaysian *gambus* tradition (Hadrami-associated performance practice paired with a bowl-backed *ūd*-type instrument) cannot be explained by a single origin story. Instead, the combined organological, historical, and ethnographic evidence points to a dual-channel process, in which two distinct transmissions converged in the Malay world to form the hybrid tradition recognised today. (A comparative summary of the two-channel hypothesis can be found at the end of this section.)

Channel 1: Hadrami Diaspora – Musical and Choreographic Transmission

The *zapin* (Arabic: *zafin*) complex—synchronised footwork, call-and-response vocals, and devotional associations—bears unmistakable hallmarks of Hadrami heritage. As documented by Ho (2006), Mobini-Kesheh (1999), and Azra (2004), Hadrami migration across the Indian Ocean from the 15th to the 18th centuries bound Southeast Asia into a transregional web of kinship, scholarship, and commerce. Within this network, *zapin* functioned not only as entertainment but as a marker of identity and communal values.

The Hadrami transmission route followed predictable cultural corridors: pilgrims and merchants travelled through Mecca, Gujarat, Aceh, and Java before reaching eastern Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula. In these settlements, Hadrami communities maintained schools, literary circles, and music-dance traditions. By the 16th century, *zapin* was already present in the peninsula; its 19th-century flourishing in Johor represents not first arrival but institutionalisation within court and community culture.

Channel 2: Ottoman Cultural Diplomacy – Instrumental Transmission

The large-bodied, fretless, bowl-backed lute used in Malaysian *gambus* traditions corresponds to the wider *ūd* family, not the Yemeni *qanbūs*. Historical studies (Casale, 2010; Faroghi, 2005; Gallop, 2015) show that from the 16th to the 18th centuries, Ottoman and Arabic diplomacy with Muslim polities in Southeast Asia, especially Aceh, featured exchanges of prestige goods. Within this context,

the ‘ūd functioned both as a marker of refinement and as a symbolic artefact of Islamic solidarity.

While no archival record explicitly documents the gifting of an ‘ūd to a Malay ruler, three strands of evidence make this route tenable: (1) historical ties between Aceh and Istanbul; (2) the symbolic value of the ‘ūd in diplomatic culture; and (3) organological correspondences between Malaysian *gambus* and Ottoman/Arabic-era instruments.

Chronological Alignment of the Two Channels

The Hadrami and Ottoman/Arabic channels are conceptually distinct but historically overlapping:

- 1. *Zapin* transmission was active in the archipelago from the 15th to the 16th centuries; it reached Malaysia early and was fully institutionalised in Johor by the 19th.
- 2. Ottoman-Aceh diplomacy peaked in the 1560s and extended into the 18th century; this longer trajectory opened avenues for cultural and material exchange.

By the late 19th to the early 20th centuries, *zapin* was firmly embedded in local culture and increasingly paired with a bowl-backed ‘ūd. This convergence is supported by both historical plausibility and extant instruments (see Figure 2 below).

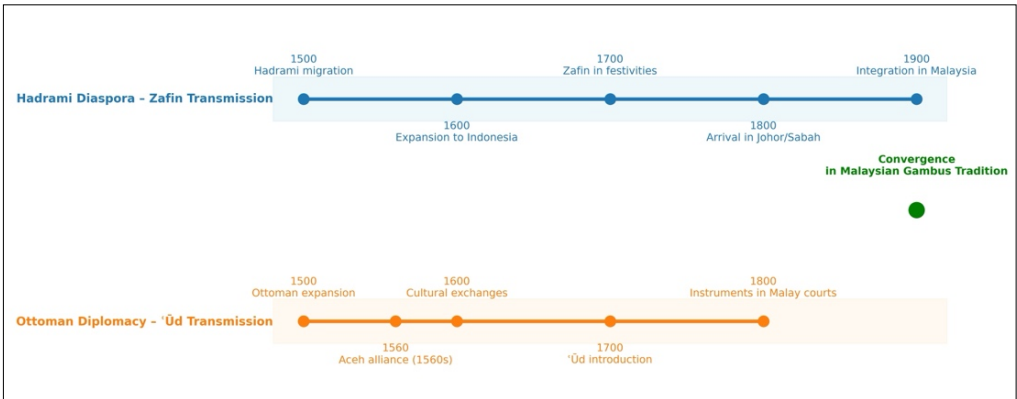


Figure 2. Timeline of two-channel transmission of the *gambus* tradition in Malaysia. The top line represents the Hadrami diaspora and the spread of *zapin* through the Indonesian archipelago (15th to the 19th centuries). The bottom line represents Ottoman/Arabic diplomatic contact and the introduction of the ‘ūd (16th to the 18th centuries). The green dot marks the point of convergence in Malaysian performance practice.

The chronological overlap strengthens the case for a layered model. Rather than imagining a single vague “moment of arrival,” the *gambus* tradition in Malaysia reflects a staged process: Hadrami *zapin* embedding in local culture, followed by later pairing with a bowl-backed *ūd* through elite exchange.

Theoretical Implications

By separating instrumental history from performance history, the two-channel model challenges the trade-route diffusion narrative and reframes the Malaysian *gambus* as the product of intersecting Islamic worlds. It demonstrates how diaspora naming practices can obscure material origins and how performance traditions can mask multiple channels of influence.

More broadly, this model contributes to debates on hybridity through a methodological shift that prioritises the sequencing of cultural flows over assumptions of synchronic arrival. Similar frameworks could be applied to other cases, such as the diffusion of the *rebab* across the Indian Ocean or the circulation of frame drums in the Mediterranean.

Table 1. *Comparative summary of the two-channel hypothesis*

| Channel | Primary Agent | Cultural Cargo | Route | Outcome in Malaysia |
|------------------------------|--|--|--|---|
| 1. Hadrami Diaspora | Migrant scholars, traders, religious leaders | <i>Zapin</i> music, dance, performance context | Via Java, Sumatra, Sulawesi, possibly Melaka | Established <i>zapin</i> as a Malay performance tradition |
| 2. Ottoman/ Arabic Diplomacy | Court envoys, symbolic exchange | <i>Ūd</i> (bowl-backed) instrument | Via Aceh or Johor | Introduced the instrument that became the <i>gambus</i> |

Implications and Moving Forward

Reframing the origins of the Malaysian *gambus* through a two-channel model carries implications that extend well beyond organological classification. It challenges entrenched assumptions in Southeast Asian music historiography, calls for a re-examination of diaspora narratives, and invites heritage practitioners to rethink how musical traditions are curated, interpreted, and taught.

Scholarly Impact

By distinguishing the transmission of performance practice (*zapin*) from the arrival of the instrument (the bowl-backed *ūd* family), this study demonstrates how the Malaysian *gambus* cannot be reduced to a single “merchant diffusion” narrative. Instead, it points to the need to treat performance and material culture as distinct but intersecting historical trajectories, each with its own agents, routes, and contexts of

adaptation. For ethnomusicologists, this carries several methodological lessons. First, it calls into question inherited origin stories, particularly those that conflate repertoire and instrument histories without sufficient organological evidence. Second, it shows the extent to which naming conventions, such as the continued use of the Hadrami-derived label *gambus*, can obscure morphological realities and disguise multiple lines of transmission. Finally, it demonstrates the value of integrating comparative organology with diaspora and diplomacy studies and allows for the reconstruction of layered pathways of convergence. Together, these contributions situate the Malaysian case within broader debates on hybridity, migration, and the circulation of cultural forms across Islamic and Indian Ocean worlds.

Heritage Preservation and Public History

The implications of this study also extend to heritage practice in Malaysia. Heritage narratives, whether in textbooks, museums, or cultural festivals, often compress complex histories into simple, linear origin stories. While such accounts are accessible to the public, they erase the diverse contributions of different cultural actors. Recognising the *gambus* as socially Hadrami yet structurally Ottoman-Arabic foregrounds the pluralism that is central to Malay musical heritage. This recognition can improve museum curation by encouraging displays that differentiate between performance traditions and instrument origins, and in doing so, clarifies for audiences how hybrid traditions emerge from multiple streams of influence. It can also enrich educational materials, particularly those produced by institutions such as Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Malaysia's national body for language and literature, and Dewan Budaya, the country's long-established performing arts and cultural magazine, by emphasising the global networks of exchange that shaped Malay culture. In community settings, acknowledging hybridity could influence cultural programming and recast the *gambus* not as a relic of Arab trade but as a dynamic emblem of Malaysia's place in a broader Islamic cultural sphere. Such reframing would not only correct historical misunderstandings but also empower practitioners, students, and audiences to see hybridity as a key and valuable part of cultural identity.

Pedagogical Applications

For music educators, particularly those working in traditional performance, ethnomusicology, and cultural history, the two-channel model offers a practical framework for teaching how convergence shapes instruments and repertoires. Rather than presenting the *gambus* as a straightforward import from Yemen, educators can guide students to see how morphological traits reflect different routes of transmission. This approach can be incorporated into performance pedagogy: for example, students learning *zapin* can be taught to distinguish between the Hadrami cultural identity of the dance and the Ottoman-Arabic morphology of the instrument that accompanies it. In doing so, they gain critical awareness of how "tradition" is

often a product of synthesis rather than singular inheritance. Moreover, by linking the Malaysian case to other comparative examples (e.g., the diffusion of the *rebab* or the adaptation of the frame drum), teachers can cultivate a wider sense of global connectedness in music. In my own teaching of the *gambus* and *ūd* across Malaysian universities, I have found that emphasising hybridity enriches both technical skill and cultural literacy. Students not only learn to play an instrument but also interrogate the historical and cultural processes that brought it into their hands.

Future Research Directions

The two-channel hypothesis is not intended as a final word, but as an invitation for further research. One promising avenue is archival study of Ottoman-Southeast Asian relations, particularly diplomatic letters, court inventories, and gift registries that may contain overlooked references to musical instruments. These sources could help to establish firmer evidence for the circulation of the *ūd* in the Malay world. Another valuable direction would be the systematic mapping of Hadrami migration routes into Southeast Asia. Genealogies, shipping records, and oral histories could be combined to create a clearer picture of how Hadrami communities carried performance traditions like *zapin* across the Indian Ocean. Finally, there is an urgent need for detailed documentation of surviving *gambus* instruments in Malaysia and Borneo. Photographic records, precise measurements, and analysis of construction techniques would enable more rigorous comparison with Ottoman and Hadrami prototypes. Such work would not only deepen the empirical foundation of the two-channel model but also generate resources for heritage preservation and instrument-making traditions in Malaysia today.

Closing Perspectives

Ultimately, adopting a two-channel perspective allows Malaysian *gambus* traditions to be understood not as isolated inheritances but as dynamic products of intersecting Islamic worlds. This reframing strengthens the academic foundation of Malay musical history while enriching its cultural and educational value. It positions the *gambus* as more than a marker of Malay identity: it becomes a testament to centuries of interconnectedness across the Indian Ocean, linking Malaysia to broader histories of diaspora, diplomacy, and cultural creativity.

Such a perspective also challenges the way “tradition” is often framed in scholarship and heritage discourse. Too often, traditions are presented as pure, singular inheritances from a distant origin. The story of the *gambus* demonstrates instead that cultural forms are frequently layered, hybrid, and negotiated. By tracing one strand to Hadrami diaspora networks and another to Ottoman-Arabic diplomacy, this study illustrates how musical cultures emerge not from one point of transmission but from multiple overlapping flows. Recognising this hybridity does not diminish the Malay claim to the *gambus*; on the contrary, it deepens that claim by situating Malay identity within wider global currents of Islamic civilisation.

At the same time, the two-channel hypothesis encourages reflection on Malaysia's place within the Indian Ocean world. Just as spices, textiles, and manuscripts circulated across these maritime routes, so, too, did instruments, repertoires, and performance traditions. The *gambus* embodies these entanglements: an object of diplomacy, a tool of devotion, and a medium of community festivity. Its continued presence in Malay culture is therefore not merely a survival of Arab trade, but a sign of Malaysia's active participation in global cultural exchanges that connected the Red Sea, the Ottoman court, and Southeast Asian polities.

Finally, the model advanced here holds promise beyond Malaysia. It can be applied comparatively to other musical traditions where diaspora and diplomacy intersect—whether the movement of the *rebab* into Central Asia, the adaptation of the violin in Indian classical music, or the circulation of frame drums around the Mediterranean. By situating the Malaysian *gambus* within this wider comparative frame, the study contributes not only to local historiography but also to global ethnomusicology. In doing so, it affirms that the *gambus* is both uniquely Malay and deeply transregional: a hybrid instrument of identity, memory, and intercultural connection.

Conclusion: Rethinking Transmission and Cultural Authority

For decades, the history of the *gambus* in Malaysia has been framed almost exclusively through the trade-route diffusion hypothesis, a narrative repeated so often it has acquired the weight of fact. This orthodoxy has shaped scholarship, heritage discourse, and public perception, while alternative explanations have been marginalised. The result has been a form of intellectual conditioning: an uncritical acceptance that the instrument must have arrived with Arab merchants, despite the absence of organological or archival evidence.

Earlier syntheses (e.g., Raja Zulkarnain and Attan, 2025) have reflected this dominant one-channel framework for the sake of representing the mainstream consensus. The present study departs from that framing by differentiating between the Hadrami transmission of *zapin* and the Ottoman-Arabic transmission of the *'ūd*, and in doing so proposes a two-channel hypothesis that better accounts for the available historical and organological evidence.

This study challenges the assumption of a single transmission pathway by advancing a two-channel transmission model grounded in historical, morphological, and cultural analysis. The *zapin* (Arabic: *zafīn*) tradition entered the Malay world through the Hadrami diaspora, embedded in religious, migratory, and kinship networks. The instrument itself—a large-bodied, fretless, bowl-backed lute aligned with the wider Ottoman/Arabic *'ūd* family—likely arrived via channels of elite diplomacy and symbolic exchange. In short, the Malaysian *gambus* emerged from Hadrami performance and Ottoman-Arabic diplomacy to become a hybrid tradition: socially Hadrami, structurally *'ūd*-derived, and fully localised in its Malaysian expression.

Recognising this complex history corrects the record and reclaims agency from inherited narratives that have conditioned scholarship to accept a single,

untested hypothesis. It positions the *gambus* not merely as a relic of merchant exchange, but as tangible evidence of Malaysia's role within the intersecting worlds of diaspora and diplomacy that defined the global Islamic network.

The two-channel hypothesis presented here offers more than a localised revision. It serves as a methodological model for disentangling complex cultural transmissions elsewhere. The refinement of the model would benefit from multidisciplinary engagement, including archival history, maritime archaeology, material culture analysis, and performance ethnography, to further illuminate the pathways through which instruments and repertoires become embedded in local traditions. By replacing repetition with evidence and assumption with analysis, this study strengthens both the academic foundation and the cultural significance of the *gambus* in Malaysia's heritage.

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Biography

Raja Zulkarnain Raja Mohd Yusof is an ethnomusicologist and senior lecturer in the Department of Performing Arts, Faculty of Creative Industries, City University Malaysia. His research explores traditional and contemporary performance practices, cultural identity, and the transmission of music across Islamic and Southeast Asian societies. He is widely recognised for introducing the *oud* (‘ūd) into Malaysian higher education in 2002 and for developing structured curricula at institutions such as ASWARA, UiTM, and UPSI. Dr. Raja has authored pioneering instructional texts on the *oud* in the Malay language (2013, 2018) and published extensively on *maqām* theory, microtonality, improvisation (*taqsīm*), and *gambus* performance. His concept of “*intonaphobia*” has contributed to scholarly debates on cultural conditioning in modal perception. Active in cultural programming, research collaborations, and heritage advocacy, he is committed to advancing the relevance of traditional music within contemporary academic and performance contexts.