The Malay Nobat: A History of Power, Acculturation, and Sovereignty

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Raja Iskandar Bin Raja Halid

The Malay Nobat: A History of Power, Acculturation, and Sovereignty

The Lexington Series in Historical Ethnomusicology: Deep Soundings.

The Malay Nobat: A History of Power, Acculturation, and Sovereignty is a well-written and meticulous book developed from fieldwork and archival sources. This is a fascinating work on nobat coming from Malaysia. What makes this book different is that it addresses nobat, originally from the Middle East and South Asia, from a Southeast Asian perspective.

The Malay nobat is a royal musical ensemble—and the music it performs—that are part of palace pageantry, symbolizing power and sovereignty. The nobat is associated with the installation of a king, the death of a sultan, and other court ceremonies, including signals for Islamic religious events like Eid. Raja Iskandar Bin Raja Halid discusses five contemporary nobat ensembles from Kedah, Perak, Selangor, Terengganu, and Brunei. These ensembles have survived the onslaught of history and are an essential part of Malay culture and history today.

The Malay nobat’s attachment to royal courts has associated it with the concept of daulat, or divine essence. It has been indigenized through the process of acculturation, but nobat’s musical instruments and cultural significance have acquired a different currency from that of their origin in the Middle East or South Asia. Nobat is immortalized in early court literature as essential to Malay culture and identity; these ensembles provide important historical sources for the sacrality of this tradition.

In Raja Halid’s book we learn how the tradition of nobat, which exists today as ritual or sacred music in Sufi shrines and Shia religious ceremonies in Pakistan, India, and Iran, has taken a very different historical turn in the Malay world. Rather than being part of public life, it has become sacred and mysterious, an heirloom of the royal court. Unlike in South Asia and the Middle East, where traditional drumming and nobat are played by villagers at Sufi shrines and Shia mosques, the Malay nobat is exclusively associated with the court and common people are not allowed to play it. The transformation and acculturation of nobat in the Malay world show how its meaning has shifted from the Middle Eastern and South Asian context, as a Southeast Asian court has developed it into a distinctive form that is strictly a tradition of the royal palace.

The Malay nobat consists of Middle Eastern and South Asian instruments—nengkara (kettledrum), nafiri (long trumpet), and serunai (shawm)—as well as Indigenous instruments such as the gendang (double-headed drum) and gong. Raja Halid calls this amalgamation of local and foreign instruments “syncretic” nobat. Citing sources from the Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai (Chronicle of the Pasai King), he informs us that the Malaka sultanate established nobat in the fifteenth century. He gives examples from Malay annals to show how Sultan Malek Al-Saleh from Pasai was the first Muslim ruler installed
through drumming. Since then, nobat has become a political tool for expanding the Malaka empire to Malay kingdoms.

*The Malay Nobat* is comprised of seven well-written chapters. Chapter 1 introduces nobat and the broader argument. Chapter 2 explores its early history, while chapter 3 places the Malay nobat in a later historical context. Chapter 4, subtitled “A Lesson from Patani,” is about Malay literature, and chapter 5 examines the Adat Aceh and seventeenth-century European encounters. Chapter 6 describes how the postcolonial nation-state of Malaysia made nobat once again a means of legitimization for a ruler, and chapter 7 is the conclusion.

The author uses archival work and historical ethnomusicology to show how the Islamic military-ceremonial use of nobat played a vital role in the Islamization of many aspects of Malay life through periodic and occasional pronouncements (*nauba*). Raja Halid informs us that the *tabalkhana* ensemble has become an essential symbol of royal authority in many courts in the Middle East and South Asia, which made it an authentic source of power and sovereignty for the Malay world to adopt for their own royal courts.

In the thirteenth century, Raja Halid writes, nobat “constituted an important part of the court regalia and symbolized the Malay ruler’s power and sovereignty. A Malay sultan who possessed one would not be legitimately installed unless he was ‘drummed’ to the sounds of the nobat” (43). He uses the interesting term *dinobatkan* (installed through drumming), which is reserved as a conduit of a sultan’s *daulat* and utilized as a means of social control in traditional Malay society. Raja Halid states that a display of disrespect for nobat is an act of *derhaka* (rebellion or disobedience); it ensures a divine curse (*tulah*) because nobat is a cultural and spiritual influence in traditional Malay society.

Each chapter of *The Malay Nobat* is rich in detail; the author introduces the intricate connections between history, archives, Malay annals, and court traditions to define Malay nobat from diverse perspectives. One fascinating example, the acquisition of the Riau court’s nobat instruments by the Terengganu court after the Dutch abolished the Riau kingdom in 1911, shows the potency of the nobat ensemble. Even with the demise of the Riau kingdom, the sacredness of nobat did not diminish but was nurtured and incorporated into another kingdom. The gift of nobat bestowed upon a subservient kingdom by a more powerful king is another interesting example of the tradition’s power.

Through the Tunku Abdul Rehman’s ceremonial installation in 1957 to the post of *yang dipertuan agong* (supreme head of the federation), a five-year position created after Malaysian independence, Raja Halid shows how the institution of kingship has survived in modern times, accompanied by the sounds of the Kedah nobat. This practice continues today: the sixteenth *yang dipertuan agong* of Malaysia, Al-Sultan Abdullah Ri’ayatuddin Al-Mustafa Billah Shah, was installed in 2019 to the drumming of the Malay nobat.

I highly recommend *The Malay Nobat* as a graduate-level exploration of Southeast Asian history, inter-Asia connections, Indian Ocean studies, and ethnomusicology of the Malay world. Scholars of South Asian and Middle Eastern studies in ethnomusicology can learn the history of nobat in these regions. The product of local source material and local histories written in Malay, the book provides a methodological
impulse for scholars of the Middle East and South Asia to look for references to nobat in Arabic, Persian, Gujarati, Bengali, Pashto, Urdu, Sindhi, and Ottoman Turkish in their respective regions.

Overall, The Malay Nobat is a very accessible book. Though nominally about the Malay nobat, in many ways it illuminates the larger Malay world from a perspective unknown to most scholars working outside the area. By engaging with the annals, Raja Halid provides a rich history of Malay kingship, and through nobat he connects the Malay royal courts to broader histories of the Middle East and South Asia. As a result, his book tells a different story about the region than the more familiar history of its religious conservatism in modern times.

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