

The *Nobat*: From Muslim Antiquity to Malay Modernity

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Abstract

The *nobat* is a percussion-based musical ensemble played in the Malay courts of Southeast Asia since the coming of Islam to the region in the thirteenth century. Originating from the Islamicate tradition of the Middle East, for centuries it has been part of the sacred court regalia and a symbol of a sultan's power and sovereignty. The *nobat* is also revered for its perceived mystical powers and ability to consolidate and maintain sociopolitical order. The spread of Islam saw the ensemble and its traditions travel via ancient trade routes, by land and sea, across imagined boundaries and then develop through the accommodation of different cultures and beliefs. It was patronised by some of the greatest Muslim empires and was played in palaces to install new rulers, announce the arrival of dignitaries, signal prayer times and used for tactical purposes and to instil courage among soldiers on the battlefield. In the postcolonial period of the late twentieth century, the sounds of the *nobat* were no longer heard when sultanates ceased to exist. However, a few have survived. Today the *nobat* still performs in the courts of Kedah, Perak, Selangor and Terengganu in Malaysia and in Brunei, and within its original context – to serve sultans. This chapter looks into the development of the *nobat*, from its Abbasid roots in the ninth century to early Malay sultanates and European colonial encounters from the seventeenth to twentieth centuries.

Keywords

Malaysia – history – *nobat* – Malay courts – Islam – indigenisation

7.1 Introduction

The *nobat* is a percussion-based musical ensemble that has been played in the Malay courts of Southeast Asia since the coming of Islam to the region. Originating from the Islamicate tradition of the Middle East, for centuries

it has been part of the sacred court regalia and a symbol of a sultan's power and sovereignty. The *nobat* is also revered for its perceived mystical powers and ability to consolidate and maintain sociopolitical order (Andaya, 2011). This ceremonial and military ensemble was also known in different parts of the world as *tablkhana* or *ṭabl-khāna* (Abbasid, Fatimid), *naqqarakhana* or *naḳḳāra-khāna* (Afghan, Persian), *nauba* or *nawba* (Umayyad, Andalusian, North African) and *naubat* (Mughal). The spread of Islam saw the ensemble and its tradition travel via ancient trade routes, by land and sea, across imagined boundaries, and develop through an accommodation of different cultures and beliefs. It was patronised by some of the greatest Muslim empires and was played in palaces to install new rulers, announce the arrival of dignitaries, signal prayer times, and used for tactical purposes and to instil courage among soldiers on the battlefield. This ensemble finally found its way from the Middle East to the Malay courts in the thirteenth century. In the postcolonial period of the late twentieth century, the sounds of the *nobat* were no longer heard when sultanates ceased to exist. However, a few have survived. Today the *nobat* still performs in the courts of Kedah, Perak, Selangor and Terengganu in Malaysia and in Brunei, and within its original context – to serve sultans. This chapter looks into the development of the *nobat*, from its Abbasid roots in the ninth century to the early Malay sultanates and European colonial encounters from the seventeenth to twentieth centuries.

The early history of the *nobat* can be seen as a process of encounters, accommodation, mimicry and reinvention that spanned over a millennium (Bhabha, 2007). What started as a religious quest in seventh-century Arabia developed rapidly into a glorious period of Muslim enlightenment, fostered by powerful political centres, that saw great artistic and scientific achievements that for centuries remained unparalleled. There was also a profound triangular relationship between sound, power and the sacred. The epic campaign of *da'wah* or proselytisation that began in the seventh century had an impact on both the conquered and conqueror. According to Islamic tradition, when Umar al-Khattab (579–644 CE), the second caliph and one of the closest companions of the Prophet Muhammad, visited Jerusalem to accept the city's surrender, he was furious to see his governor and generals in fine clothing. It was reported that he pelted them with stones and reprimanded them for mimicking the ways of the Persian royals and forgetting their humble roots (Numani, 2004: 43). Noticing that the caliph was in ragged and patched robes while entering the city, there was a feeling of nervousness among the generals about the prying gaze of the city's culturally superior inhabitants. Despite their military might, there was still a conscious sense of inferiority among the early conquering

Muslims, something that would change when the empire grew further in size and wealth.

Despite Umar's warnings, Muslim rulers succumbed to the trappings of royalty: the pomp and ceremonies, the sights and sounds of the *kufṛ* (infidel) civilisations they initially abhorred. This introjection of the superior symbols of political power brought about the development and eventual establishment of the ceremonial and military ensemble into an institution that signified Muslim supremacy. The *tablkhana*, *naqqarakhana* and *nauba* tradition became part of the fluid process of identity formation, largely defined by the higher structure of a heterogeneous Islamic society – the caliphs, sultans, governors, military commanders, emirs – in what Shamsul A.B. (1996: 477) describes as the 'authority-defined' social reality. Detached, and cleansed from its previous non-Islamic religious connotations, the ensemble and its accompanying traditions were Islamically legitimised by incorporating them into religious rituals such as the daily call to prayer and the two Eid celebrations. With this newly invented tradition (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983: 1), an imagined sonic boundary was thus drawn not only between Muslim-controlled territories and the 'other' but also among regional rulers within the sphere of Islamic influence. While ubiquitous as an Islamic tradition, its dispersed variety can also be viewed as a process of transplantation and localisation across a vast geopolitical domain.

The establishment of the *nobat* as a court institution can be viewed not as a result of the collective agency of the masses but largely of the needs and desires of the ruling elites. The ensemble developed in a period when societies were governed by absolute monarchs, military commanders or regional governors, the only ones who had the means and reasons to patronise it. The ruling class was also responsible for the advancement of the arts and sciences where musicians, poets, painters, philosophers and scientists were under court patronage. This resulted in the emergence of new musical styles and concepts (for example, *nauba*), wonderful paintings and literature (for example, *Shahnameh* of Ferdowsi) and ingenious inventions (for example, al-Jazari's water clocks). As we shall see, these surviving products provide invaluable insights into the history and development of the *tablkhana*, *naqqarakhana* and *nauba* ensemble.

The aim of this chapter is to provide an overview of the history of the Malay *nobat*, considering its forebears' conceptual and material development across the Islamicate world during the most intensive period of Islam's expansion beginning in the seventh century. It is beyond the scope here to fully reconstruct the history of the earlier ensembles. We instead attempt to expand existing discussions and fill certain gaps by looking into selected literary and