

Gambus Ensemble and Zapin as Identity of Malay Arts in Riau

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Abstract

Gambus and Zapin are art forms that have thrived within the Riau Malay community. The Gambus is characterized as a musical ensemble, while Zapin manifests as a dance form, often accompanied by musical elements. Both arts have their origins in the cultural influences of the Arab world, linked to trade and the spread of Islam. Over time, Gambus and Zapin have evolved alongside traditional Malay arts, transitioning into forms that range from traditional to creative and modern, and have become integral to the artistic identity of the Riau Malay society. This article explores the roles and presence of both Gambus and Zapin within the Riau community. The study gathers data through field studies and literature reviews using qualitative research methods. The findings reveal that the Gambus ensemble and Zapin dance have become potent symbols of identity for the Riau Malay population.

Keywords: Gambus, Zapin, identity, Riau Malay arts

DOI: 10.7176/ADS/109-04

Publication date: January 31st 2024

1. Introduction

The province of Riau, Indonesia, is home to a Malay cultural community along national and international trade routes. Interaction with various ethnic groups within the archipelago and foreign nations has significantly influenced Malay culture and religion. The Nusantara ethnic groups frequently interact with them are the Minang, Batak, Bugis, Banjar, Aceh, and Javanese. Foreign influences include Arab, Persian, and Gujarati cultures. The presence of Arab, Persian, and Gujarati traders and their role in spreading Islam to the Riau region has left an artistic legacy deeply rooted in Islamic traditions. This includes the musical genre of Gambus and the dance form Zapin.

Artistic influences from Arab and Malay cultures distinctly dominated the arts in the Riau region, especially during the 19th century. One art form influenced by both cultures is the Riau Gambus ensemble (Arzul, 2002). The Riau Gambus serves as an accompaniment to the Zapin dance. Today, both art forms are deeply ingrained in the Riau community. Zapin and Gambus have become the artistic identity of the Riau people. Over time, these arts have evolved into creative and modern forms. Gambus has developed into a distinct ensemble with a strong Malay identity, while Zapin has evolved into creative and modern dances highly appreciated by the younger generation. Despite their evolutions, all modern and creative Zapin dances are still accompanied by the Gambus ensemble.

Research on Gambus and Zapin includes studies by Laila Fitriah et al. (2022), focusing on implementing religious values in Riau Malay Gambus music. They discuss Gambus's presence among the millennial generation in Pekanbaru. Martion et al. (2020) explore the development of Zapin dance choreography in Jambi. Fatonah et al. (2022) delve into the aesthetics of Malay dances in Kota Jambi. Rio Eka Putra (2016) discusses the function of Gambus music in Riau society. Arzul (2002) examines the transformation of Gambus from personal performances on boats to stage art.

This research aims to discuss the existence of the Riau Gambus ensemble and Zapin dance, which have become the artistic identity of Riau Malay culture. It explores how Gambus, initially influenced by Arab music, transformed into Riau Malay music and further evolved to accompany traditional, creative, and modern Zapin dances. Additionally, it examines the development of Zapin dance in Riau society, originating from Arab culture and evolving into traditional, creative, and modern dance forms. The study concludes that the Riau Gambus ensemble and Zapin dance have become the artistic identity of the Riau Malay community.

2. Methodology

The methodology employed for data collection in this study is qualitative. Data were gathered through field studies and literature reviews. Field data, considered primary data, were collected through observations of the presence and utilization of Gambus and Zapin within the Riau Malay community. These observations noted that Gambus and Zapin have undergone significant development and changes. In terms of quality, this development involves transformations from traditional to creative and modern forms. In terms of quantity, particularly with Zapin, there is an increased interest and participation among the younger generation. After these observations, interviews, and documentation were conducted to gather more detailed information. Literature data, serving as

secondary data, was crucial to reinforce the findings from the field. It incorporates various studies on Gambus and Zapin conducted by previous researchers. This secondary data provides a wealth of supporting information and written facts compiled by researchers and authors who have preceded the current study.

3. Discussion

3.1. History and Instrumentation of Gambus Music

The presence of Arab, Persian, and Gujarati traders in the Riau region has left behind artistic forms deeply rooted in Islam, among other enduring legacies that serve as sources of pride for the community. Besides commercial purposes, these traders' primary mission was to spread and develop the Islamic religion. Among the three cultural influences mentioned, it appears that the local community rapidly embraced Arab culture. One of the many remnants of Arab influence in Riau is the art of Gambus, which evolved alongside the development of the Zapin dance. Initially, Malay Gambus art served as a means of communication for introducing Islam (Fitriah, 2021). This is a reinforcing factor explaining why Malay Gambus music in Riau is closely associated with Islamic teachings. One noticeable aspect is the Gambus musical instrument, adopted from the Middle Eastern Al'ud instrument (Fitriah et al., 2022).

The 'Encyclopedia of Riau Regional Music and Dance' (1977: 104) states, "Gambus is an important instrument used to accompany Zapin and Khasidah songs." Sumaryo, L.E. (1975: 33-34) further notes, "Islam and the Arab-Persian culture have made significant contributions to shaping the musical style in Sumatra, and their influence is particularly evident in how songs are played or sung in Aceh. The musical equipment used is the Gambus, found almost throughout Sumatra, especially in Riau. However, in further development, the form of the Gambus used in Riau has changed.

The Riau Gambus body is somewhat slender, small-sized but longer, and is called the *gambus selodang* (similar to the wrapping of coconut flowers before they become fruit buds). The *gambus selodang* has 6 or 7 strings. In contrast, the Arab Gambus, better known as the Oud (al-ud), has a larger but slightly shorter body and 11 strings. Although the Riau Gambus differs in form from the Arab Gambus, it is clear that the Riau Gambus is a modification of the Arab Gambus in terms of playing technique, function, and the songs played. According to S. Berrin (1991), the development of patterns and forms of Arab artistic legacies occurred not only with the *gambus* but also in the Zapin dance. The *al-ud* instrument and a drum originally accompanied the Zapin dance. Due to challenges in obtaining these instruments in Riau, the community replaced them with the Riau Gambus as the accompanying instruments.

S. Berrin (2000) stated, 'The Siak Sri Inderapura region in Riau is a center of a kingdom based on Islam, and in Siak, many experts in Zapin and Gambus Riau can be found.' The history book of the Riau region (1982: 90) explains that during Sultan Alamudin Shah's reign, the center of government was moved to Senapelan to establish a trading center. Subsequently, the town of Senapelan was called 'Bandar Pekan' and eventually became Pekanbaru, now the capital of Riau Province. Along with relocating the kingdom's center to Pekanbaru, artists from Siak Inderapura flocked to urban areas. Some chose to live around the Siak River, which divides Pekanbaru, such as in Tanjung Medang and its surroundings.

Although most Riau artists acknowledge that Gambus is an adaptation of the Arab Gambus, there is also a legend about the origin of *gambus*, as written by Putra (2016):

'Here is a tale from the olden days about a couple deeply in love. Suddenly, the woman was struck by a deadly illness and passed away, leaving the man contemplating his fate. He cried, mourned, and lamented throughout the day. To soothe his longing heart, he took a piece of wood and shaped it like a person, illustrating the body of his departed beloved. He embraced and caressed the formed body every day, morning and evening. He touched the part shaped like hips below and caressed the head part while singing melancholic, mournful songs. Over time, the man was inspired by the inanimate object he caressed to produce sound. He stretched several strings or threads from the head to the hip-like part. From this, the instrument called *gambus* was born.'



Figure 1. Example of Gambus Selodang. Source: <https://lamriau.id/marwas/> (accessed December 10, 2023).

Originally, the *gambus* was played solo as entertainment during solitary moments. However, as it evolved into performance music for Zapin, the *gambus* was developed into an ensemble by adding 4 to 6 *marwas* instruments (double-headed frame drums) (see figure 2). *Marwas* is a small, short-sized drum, sometimes accompanied by a violin and a *tetawak* (a small-sized gong). Over time, *marwas* has become a crucial percussion instrument in the Gambus Riau ensemble. To this day, the *gambus* and *marwas* remain the primary instruments in Gambus Riau.

The pattern of striking the *marwas* in accompanying Zapin music consists of three elements that produce the tones of *tung*, *tak*, and *pak*. The sound of *pak*, also called *senting* or *naik*, is produced by striking the *marwas* with all five fingers in the center of the drumskin. The sound *tak*, which falls on counts 1 and 5, is a high-pitched tone struck on the edge of the *marwas*. *Tung* refers to the low-pitched sound struck in the middle of the *marwas*. The rhythmic patterns of *tak* and *tung* are played when the Zapin singer recites verses, while the striking of *senting (pak)* occurs between the verses/lyrics sung by the singer and serves as a conclusion to the song. The strikes of *tak* and *tung* become distinctive features of the *marwas*, differentiating it from other percussion instruments in accompanying Zapin music. There are five types of *marwas* strikes used in accompanying Zapin music: *pukul 1* (determining the rhythm or tempo), *pukul 2* (filling), *pukul 3* (enlivening), *mecah* (breaking), and *nengkah* (raising) (RiauMagz.com, accessed December 10, 2023).



Figure 2. Example of Marwas. Source: Hendra Burhan, <https://lamriau.id/marwas/> (accessed December 10, 2023)

Zapin consists of both Zapin music and Zapin dance. In Riau, Zapin music is synonymous with the Riau Gambus ensemble. Initially, Zapin music, influenced by Arab culture, featured instruments such as the Al-'ud and the tambourine. As it spread to areas influenced by Malay culture, Zapin music underwent development according to the resources and musical concepts of the societies in various countries and regions it reached, such as Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, South Sumatra, North Sumatra, Jambi, Lampung, and Riau. This evolution led to the emergence of unique musical concepts in these regions. In Riau, the Riau Gambus ensemble is characterized by a distinct playing style and composition that aligns with the spirit and musical nuances deeply

rooted in Riau society. According to Kadir (1988), Malay music genres influenced by West Asia, such as Gambus, Zapin, and Gazal, have been adapted to modern musical instruments to generate broader interest. Songs with Gambus and Gazal rhythms have evolved along with other musical styles.

Based on the transformation of the *al-ud* and tambourine into the *gambus* and *marwas*, there were natural changes in musical composition, with the *gambus* playing a role both as an element of Zapin art and as a standalone traditional Riau ensemble. The play of the *gambus* is based on six strings (cords) arranged in three basic tones as the foundation for constructing the musical composition. Manaf Kamis (1993) states, 'There are six strings in *gambus*, and every two strings produce three different notes: the lower note E, mid-note A, and upper-note D (Kamis, 1993:2).' In other regions, it is also explained that the six strings produce three different tones: the lowest tone E, the middle tone A, and the highest tone D. Out of the six strings, every two cords produce the same note.

The themes of Riau *gambus* music, similar to *gambus* music in other Malay regions, revolve around moral and religious aspects. They are typically presented solo, accompanied by a *gambus* and 4 to 6 *marwas* drums. Instruments like the violin and harmonium were added for melody in subsequent periods. This *gambus* ensemble serves to accompany Zapin dance, emphasizing foot movements. Notable at the time were dance moves like 'Anak Ayam Patah Sembilan' (Nine Broken Chicks), featuring diagonal steps, eagle-like movements, hopping, and the use of a rattan circle. Popular Zapin or *gambus* songs included 'Lancang Kuning,' 'Pulut Hitam,' and 'Sahabat Laila,' among others.

3.2. The function of Malay Gambus in Riau

Music refers to how music is utilized within a society, involving practices and customs regarding how music is used or for what purposes it is typically employed. This usage may originate from the musical instruments or their connection to other activities. Allan P. Merriam (1964) puts forth four interpretations of function: (1) synonymous with 'organizer,' 'playing a score,' or actively doing something; (2) functions are not arbitrary, all social facts have functions; (3) functions are based on physical sensation; and (4) functions can be described as specific effectiveness. Therefore, the use of music as motivation leading to a musical event must be distinguished from its function as the tangible impact of that event. Referring to Merriam's opinion, Malay Gambus in Riau is used and functionalized in various social contexts within the Malay community.

According to historical accounts of the development of Islam in Riau, Gambus, besides serving as a means of entertainment with religious feelings and nuances, also functions as a medium for da'wah (religious propagation) by accompanying *khasidah* songs (Islamic-themed songs). These songs typically consist of verses and quatrains containing Islamic teachings. This became the main essence and spirit in the character of Riau Gambus, deeply rooted in the hearts of the Malay community in Riau. Hence, it is not surprising that during the reign of the 12th Sultan of Siak, Assaidisy Syarif Qasim Abdul Jalil Syaifuddin, Gambus was often used in ceremonies welcoming royal guests.

This is significantly different from the situation in Pekanbaru, where the community remains consistent with Malay and Islamic values, and the functions and concepts esteemed by their predecessors from Siak Sri Indrapura are starting to change. The current Gambus ensemble functions primarily as entertainment to express emotional experiences, whether in matters of love, life, or destiny. Songs containing Islamic teachings, once integral to Gambus music, are now rare. Some Gambus artists encountered in this research could not perform songs in Arabic that convey Islamic values.

In addition to serving as entertainment, the Riau Gambus ensemble also functions musically to accompany the Zapin dance. In this context, the Gambus is accompanied by percussion instruments such as *marwas* and is sometimes supplemented with *tetawak* and violin. Previously in Siak Sri Indrapura, Gambus was often used in royal ceremonies, such as waiting for guests and entertaining the sultan. It is used in wedding ceremonies, circumcision ceremonies, and other artistic performances.

3.2.1. Gambus as Personal Entertainment

Before the Riau Gambus developed into its current ensemble, originally in the region of Siak Sri Indrapura, the gambus was played solo, accompanying songs sung by the *gambus* player alone without any other musical instruments. These songs typically had themes related to fate (about life) and religious themes with verses about Islamic teachings. In this context, the Gambus served as both a means of entertainment and a way to draw closer to God. It was also commonly played by fishermen on boats while navigating rivers and waiting for fish to bite (Putra, 2016; Arzul, 2002). The songs played in this setting often had themes related to love and fate and took the form of free verse. In the context of personal entertainment, the presentation of Riau Gambus was more spontaneous, without careful preparation, and highly dependent on the conditions, situations, and atmosphere of the Gambus player.

There were two types of Riau solo Gambus performances: (1) the *gambus* player played a melody without spontaneous words; (2) played a melody accompanied by songs containing verses or quatrains with an Islamic nuance. First, in performing a melody without words, the *gambus* player created a melody freely and spontaneously within the tonal range, using the usual musical scale. The *gambus* player did not adhere to a structured system of tones but improvised more to create a spontaneous melody, occasionally interspersed with words or chants with verses or words with a religious nuance like "yaalai yaa rabbana," "yaa karim," and other Islamically nuanced words.

In contrast, in the second context, the *gambus* player typically performed songs with Islamic nuances, containing Islamic verses or quatrains, such as "Awal Bismillah" and "Anak Ayam Turun Sepuluh." This aligns with one of the functions of presenting Riau Gambus: to entertain oneself and serve as a means to instill Islamic values in children through the verses played. The presentation of Riau Gambus in this context is influenced by the Islamic experience and ethics held by the player, as well as the love, longing, and admiration for the greatness of God.

According to Takari and Dewi (2008), using quatrains plays a significant role in Malay music songs. Therefore, quatrains become a distinctive feature in Malay music performances. Songs crafted based on quatrains always have continuously changing lyrics. The change in lyrics becomes a characteristic feature of Malay music. For example, for the same song by the same singer, the singer may use different quatrains at different times. The conditions, situations, contexts, and environments greatly influence the opening and content of the quatrains.

Riau Gambus is often used as a 'companion' for fishermen on boats. The songs played usually take the form of quatrains with themes about fate, advice, and love that have become popular among the community, such as "Sayang Serawak," "Lancang Kuning," "Tiup Api," and "Pulut Hitam." Sometimes, the lyrics of the songs can be replaced with other free quatrains according to the desired atmosphere (Arzul, 2002; 1994). The content of the quatrains or verses played by the *gambus* player aims to express the emotions experienced. This can be observed from the quatrains and verses of songs that deal with various aspects of life, such as the complexities of life or love. The following is an example of the quatrains commonly sung:

Pulutlah hitam makan berkuah	The black glutinous rice is eaten with broth
Dimakan anak dalam perahu	Consumed by children in the boat
Hancurlah sudah hatiku resah	My heart is shattered, restless
Sama bersama menanggung rindu	Together, we bear the longing
Sungailah Siak airnya dalam	The Siak River flows deep.
Di sana budak (anak-anak) mandi bermandi	There, children swim and frolic.
Hatiku rusak remuklah redam	My heart is damaged, silently broken.
Mengenang adik nanti bernanti	Remembering siblings, endlessly waiting
Pulutlah hitam makan berhidang	The black glutinous rice served on the table
Dihidang oleh sianak dara	Served by a young lady
Rindu dan dendam saling berpandang	Longing and resentment exchange glances
Untuk penghibur hati nan lara	For the comfort of a sad heart
Batanglah Kampar tempat berkelah	The trunks of Kampar, a place for playful banter.

Ramai dikunjungi muda dan mudi	Visited by both a young man and a young lady
Hari terdampar dimulut indah	The day is stranded in the beautiful mouth
Hanyut terkungkung dimakan budi	Drifting away, confined by courtesy

3.2.2. Gambus as Zapin Accompaniment

Zapin is an art form introduced concurrently with the spread of Islam by traders from Arab and Gujarat. Alongside the spread of Islam, these traders also disseminated cultural elements like Zapin, which gained sympathy from the community. People believed that Islam promoted the values of equality and brotherhood, making Zapin more appealing. Zapin evolved into two forms: Arab Zapin, known as Zapin Lama (old Zapin), which developed among the descendants of Arabs, and Malay Zapin, which flourished among the Malay community and incorporated Malay cultural elements.

The presence of Zapin dance in Riau society, particularly in the Sultanate of Siak Sri Indrapura, holds a special place in the people's hearts. Zapin dance serves as a means to convey the teachings of Islam, etiquette, and manners, or what is known as 'tunjuk agar Melayu.' Thus, Zapin dance has significantly influenced the social life of the Siak Sri Indrapura and the Malay communities in Riau. Traditionally, Zapin Malay Riau was performed by men, but nowadays, it includes male and female performers. The dance movements of Zapin are characterized by patterns that emphasize foot movements. Zapin dance is typically performed standing, showcasing active footwork at high, medium, and low levels. The costumes for Zapin include a 'baju teluk belanga' (traditional Malay shirt), pants, woven Siak *songket* fabric, and a black 'kupiah' (headgear) as headwear (see Figure 3).

The structure of a Zapin dance presentation generally consists of three parts: the opening, which includes a greeting; the main part, consisting of various movements; and 'tahtim' or 'tahto' as the conclusion (Takari and Dewi, 2008: 162). The presentation of Zapin dance is a combination of movements, dancer floor patterns, costume makeup, accompaniment, and the performance venue, all of which come together to form a unified presentation. The form of the dance cannot be separated from its supporting aspects, such as the dancers, music, and so on. These aspects form an interconnected unity, each serving different functions and complementing each other. The integrity of these aspects illustrates the overall form of the dance presentation. Movements in Zapin dance generally carry symbolic values.



Figure 3. Zapin dance. Source: <https://www.gramedia.com/literasi/tari-zapin/> (accessed 20 December 2023).

Music in this dance accompanies, regulates tempo, and guides foot movements, making the Zapin dance appear more lively. The lyrics presented while accompanying the Zapin dance express greetings and apologies. The musical instruments used are one *gambus selodang* and 4 to 6 *marwas* (double-headed frame drums). Originally, Zapin was accompanied by the 'al'ud' and drum. However, due to the difficulty in obtaining these instruments, they were replaced with *gambus selodang* and *marwas* drums. With the inclusion of 'marwas' in the presentation of Gambus Riau, an ensemble has been formed where music is built through the melody of the *gambus*, accompanied by vocals and the rhythmic pattern of *marwas* drum beats.

Initially, in accompanying Zapin, the Gambus Riau ensemble used only two *marwas* (one lead and one follower). Based on performance needs, 4 to 6 *marwas* are used, with one as the lead and the rest as followers and accentuators. Music and dance each have patterns and rhythms that are interrelated. A dance with accompanying musical rhythm would feel full and be challenging for dancers, as they would not need a sense of

the rhythm and tempo needed for their dance (Putra, 2016). As a traditional Malay art form, Gambus and Zapin meet the needs for both secular and religious entertainment in various celebrations, such as the Prophet's birthday, Eid al-Fitr, and other significant Islamic holidays.

3.3. Structure of Malay Gambus Songs

Structurally, the presentation of Gambus Riau is composed of two main aspects: music and literature. The music is built upon elements of rhythm and melody, which are universally found in the musical cultures of various societies. The structure of Gambus Riau songs typically consists of 2, 3, or 4 verses/lyrics, each following an a-b-a-b pattern. The melodic cycle of the songs includes sections starting with an introductory melody, then a vocal melody presented alternately with an interlude melody, and concluding with a closing melody. The player usually performs the vocal melody, as it has become a tradition for a *gambus* player to also serve as a singer, adding a distinctive element to the presentation of Gambus Riau.

The presentation of Gambus Riau can be performed solo, combining vocals and *gambus* played by a single person. The *gambus* player plays the same melody as the song being sung. Although the interaction between the vocal and instrumental parts influences the overall presentation, the message conveyed through the song (literature) is more quickly and easily understood by the audience. In individual presentations, especially those performed at home, the songs played often have an Islamic nuance, whether in lyrics/poetry or instrumental pieces.

4. Conclusion

The Gambus ensemble and Zapin have become deeply rooted and well-developed arts in the Malay society of Riau. The Gambus ensemble, originating from the influence of Arab music and specifically the *al'ud* and tambourine instruments, has evolved into creative music and has become a strong characteristic of Riau Malay music. This evolution involved transforming the *al'ud* into the *gambus selodang*, created by the people of Riau, and replacing the tambourine with *marwas*. This transformation changed the initial concept of music into a new style of Riau Malay music. Zapin, conversely, is a combination of dance and music. The Zapin dance has rapidly evolved in society, particularly among the younger generation, leading to the emergence of creative Zapin dance styles. The music used to accompany Zapin dance is the Gambus ensemble, which has become synonymous with Zapin music. Although these two art forms have developed independently, Zapin dance is always closely associated with either Gambus or Zapin music. Together, these arts have become the cultural identity of the Malay society in Riau, continuing to the present day.

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