

Reframing Gambus Learning in Malaysian Higher Arts Education: An Autoethnographic Study of Early Maqām-Based Practice and Knowledge Transmission at Akademi Seni Kebangsaan (2003)

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ABSTRACT

This autoethnographic study documents the early introduction of *maqām*-based learning and notation-mediated instruction into Malaysian *gambus* pedagogy within higher arts education. Focusing on instructional practice at Akademi Seni Kebangsaan (now ASWARA) in 2003, the article examines a pedagogical shift from predominantly oral, repertoire-based transmission toward structured modal understanding grounded in written notation and theoretical explanation. Drawing on the author's lived experience as a tutor appointed to support *gambus* instruction at the institution, the study reconstructs the conditions under which *maqāmāt*, including *Ajam*, *Nahawand*, *Rast*, *Kurd*, *Bayātī*, *Hijāz*, *Ṣabā* and *Sikah*, were first introduced as conceptual systems rather than solely as performance material. The findings highlight the absence of prior formalised teaching resources, theoretical frameworks, or notation-based methodologies for *gambus* learning in Malaysia at the time. By situating this pedagogical intervention within its institutional and historical context, the article argues that early *maqām*-based instruction contributed to the reconfiguration of *gambus* learning as a knowledge-oriented practice, laying foundations for subsequent developments in Malaysian *oud* and *gambus* pedagogy. The study contributes to broader discussions on knowledge transmission, notation, and pedagogical transformation in orally rooted musical traditions.

Keywords: *gambus* pedagogy, *maqām*-based learning, autoethnography, music notation in oral traditions, Malaysian higher arts education

1. INTRODUCTION

Gambus learning in Malaysia has historically been grounded in oral transmission, relying primarily on imitation, memorisation, and repertoire-based learning. Within both community and institutional contexts, pedagogical knowledge was typically passed from teacher to student through demonstration rather than through written materials or formalised theoretical explanation. While this approach supported continuity of performance practice, it offered limited mechanisms for articulating modal structure, pitch organisation, or systematic progression in learning. As a result, *gambus* pedagogy in Malaysia developed largely as a practice-oriented tradition, with minimal emphasis on analytical frameworks or explicit musical concepts that could support broader cognitive understanding of the instrument and its modal foundations.

Prior to the early 2000s, the teaching of *gambus* within Malaysian higher arts education lacked structured instructional materials, notation-based resources, or formalised approaches to *maqām* learning. Modal systems were not introduced as conceptual entities, and students were generally unfamiliar with the identification, tonal centres, or pitch structures of essential *maqāmāt* such as *Ajam*, *Nahawand*, *Rast*, *Kurd*, *Bayātī*, *Hijāz*, *Šabā* and *Sikah*. Learning outcomes were therefore closely tied to the reproduction of repertoire rather than to the internalisation of modal knowledge as transferable musical understanding. This pedagogical condition formed the backdrop against which a new approach to *gambus* learning emerged in 2003 within Akademi Seni Kebangsaan, marking an early attempt to reframe *gambus* instruction through *maqām*-based practice and notation-mediated learning.

The pedagogical shift examined in this study emerged from a specific institutional and historical moment. In late 2003, the author was appointed as a tutor to support *gambus* learning within the music programme, working alongside an established master practitioner whose teaching was grounded in oral transmission and repertoire continuity. This appointment coincided with the author's prior exposure to structured *oud* pedagogy acquired through formal study in London, where *maqāmāt* were taught as theoretical systems supported by notation, scale construction, and modal awareness. The contrast between these learning

environments revealed a significant pedagogical gap within Malaysian *gambus* education, particularly in relation to modal cognition, pitch organisation, and the absence of written learning materials. The introduction of notation-based *maqām* learning at this juncture did not seek to replace oral tradition, but rather to supplement existing practices by making implicit musical knowledge explicit and transferable.

Given the absence of documented curricula, teaching materials, or formal records of *maqām*-based *gambus* learning in Malaysia at the time, autoethnography is employed as the most appropriate methodological approach for examining this early pedagogical intervention. Autoethnography enables the systematic analysis of lived teaching and learning experiences situated within their institutional and cultural contexts, particularly in cases where conventional archival sources are unavailable. The purpose of this article is therefore to document and critically reflect on the early introduction of *maqām*-based learning and notation-mediated practice in Malaysian *gambus* pedagogy in 2003, and to examine how this approach contributed to a reframing of *gambus* learning as a knowledge-oriented practice within higher arts education. By articulating this formative moment, the study aims to contribute to broader discussions on knowledge transmission, pedagogy, and the role of notation in the transformation of orally rooted musical traditions. This study is written with awareness of the author's institutional proximity and adopts a reflexive stance to ensure analytical distance.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Gambus Learning in Malaysia Prior to 2003

Gambus learning in Malaysia prior to the early 2000s was shaped predominantly by oral transmission and repertoire-based apprenticeship. Musical knowledge was communicated through demonstration, imitation, and repeated performance, with pedagogical emphasis placed on memorisation and stylistic continuity rather than on the articulation of underlying modal systems. Such learning environments are consistent with broader ethnomusicological descriptions of orally rooted musical

traditions, where embodied practice and interpersonal transmission form the primary modes of knowledge transfer (Nettl, 2005; Racy, 2003).

Within this pedagogical context, theoretical engagement with *maqām* was largely implicit. Modal identity was absorbed through prolonged exposure to repertoire rather than through explicit instruction in scale construction, tonal centres, or intervallic organisation. Ethnomusicological studies of Arab and related musical traditions have long noted that *maqām* knowledge is frequently internalised through performance practice rather than formalised theory, particularly outside conservatory settings (Touma, 1996; Marcus, 2007). In the Malaysian *gambus* context, this resulted in learners performing modal material without necessarily possessing conscious awareness of *maqām* nomenclature or structural differentiation.

The absence of written notation further reinforced reliance on memory and imitation as the dominant learning strategies. Without visual representations of pitch organisation, learners had limited opportunities to engage analytically with melodic structure or to generalise modal understanding beyond specific pieces. Scholars have observed that while oral transmission is highly effective in sustaining stylistic integrity, it can constrain the development of transferable musical knowledge when employed as the sole pedagogical mode within institutional settings (Nettl, 2005; Marcus, 2007). In the case of Malaysian *gambus* learning, this pedagogical condition limited systematic progression and theoretical reflection, particularly within higher arts education contexts.

It was within this learning environment that early efforts to introduce *maqām*-based learning and notation-mediated practice emerged in 2003 at Akademi Seni Kebangsaan. The introduction of written notation and explicit modal explanation did not seek to displace oral tradition, but rather to supplement existing learning practices by rendering implicit musical knowledge visible and conceptually accessible. This moment marked a significant shift in *gambus* pedagogy, reframing learning from an exclusive reliance on repertoire reproduction toward a knowledge-oriented engagement with *maqām* as a transferable musical system.

2.2 Maqām as Musical Knowledge in Oud Traditions

Within Arab and Turkish *oud* traditions, *maqām* functions not merely as a scalar framework but as an integrated system of musical knowledge encompassing pitch organisation, modal hierarchy, melodic development, and affective orientation. Ethnomusicological scholarship consistently characterises *maqām* as a modal concept that combines structural elements with culturally embedded performance conventions, including characteristic phrases, modulations, and expressive trajectories (Touma, 1996; Racy, 2003). Mastery of the *oud* within these traditions is therefore closely associated with the internalisation of *maqāmāt* as cognitive and expressive systems rather than as isolated technical patterns.

In pedagogical contexts where *maqām* is taught explicitly, learners are introduced to modal structures through systematic engagement with tonal centres, *ajnās* construction, intervallic relationships, and modal progression. Studies of *oud* pedagogy in conservatory and semi-formal learning environments indicate that such approaches facilitate deeper modal awareness and greater flexibility in improvisation and interpretation (Marcus, 2007). This conceptual understanding allows performers to recognise modal identity beyond specific compositions, supporting improvisatory practices such as *taqīm* and enabling informed navigation between related *maqāmāt* during performance.

However, ethnomusicological research also highlights that *maqām* knowledge has traditionally been transmitted through oral and experiential means, particularly in non-institutional settings. In these contexts, modal understanding is often acquired implicitly through prolonged listening, imitation, and embodied practice rather than through formal theoretical explanation (Nettl, 2005; Racy, 2003). While this mode of transmission has proven effective in sustaining stylistic continuity, it can limit the articulation of *maqām* as an abstract musical knowledge, especially for learners operating within modern educational institutions that prioritise explicit learning outcomes and structured progression.

The *oud* occupies a central position within *maqām* pedagogy due to its fretless design and melodic flexibility, which allow precise

articulation of microtonal intervals and nuanced modal inflections. As a result, *oud* instruction in Arab and Turkish traditions has frequently served as a primary site for the transmission of *maqām* knowledge, whether through oral apprenticeship or formalised curricula (Touma, 1996; Marcus, 2007). When *maqām* is treated as a knowledge system rather than as repertoire alone, the *oud* becomes both a practical and conceptual instrument through which learners engage with modal theory, melodic logic, and expressive intent.

Understanding *maqām* as a form of musical knowledge is therefore critical to examining pedagogical transformation in *gambus* learning contexts. The introduction of explicit *maqām*-based learning frameworks, particularly when supported by notation, represents a shift from implicit absorption toward conscious modal cognition. This conceptualisation provides the foundation for analysing how early *maqām*-based learning practices introduced into Malaysian *gambus* pedagogy in 2003 reframed learning processes and expanded the epistemological scope of *gambus* education within higher arts institutions.

2.3 Notation and Knowledge Transmission in Orally Rooted Music

The role of notation in orally rooted musical traditions has long been debated within ethnomusicology, particularly in relation to concerns about embodiment, stylistic nuance, and cultural authenticity. Scholars have cautioned that notation, when treated as a prescriptive substitute for oral transmission, may risk constraining expressive flexibility and performative variation (Nettl, 2005; Racy, 2003). However, ethnomusicological and pedagogical literature also recognises that notation can function as a complementary cognitive tool when employed reflexively, particularly within institutional learning environments that require explicit articulation of musical knowledge.

Within Arab and Turkish music traditions, notation has historically occupied a supportive rather than authoritative role. It has been used to visualise pitch organisation, *maqām* structure, and formal outlines, while ornamentation, phrasing, and expressive detail continue to be transmitted through listening and embodied practice (Touma, 1996; Marcus, 2007). In conservatory and semi-formal settings, written notation often serves as a scaffold that enables learners to conceptualise

maqām beyond individual compositions, supporting analytical awareness of scale structure, *ajnās* relationships, and modulating pathways.

When I first engaged with *gambus* learning in Malaysia, notation played little to no role in pedagogical practice. Learning relied almost entirely on oral imitation and memorisation, with no established written materials for *maqām* explanation or modal comparison. As I later documented in my study on the institutionalisation of *oud* pedagogy in Malaysia, this absence limited learners' ability to conceptualise *maqām* as transferable musical knowledge and constrained systematic pedagogical progression within higher arts education (Raja Yusof, 2025). The introduction of notation-mediated *maqām* learning in 2003 therefore emerged not as an attempt to replace oral tradition, but as a response to institutional learning needs that required clearer articulation of musical concepts.

In my pedagogical practice, notation functioned primarily as a diagnostic and explanatory device rather than as a performance prescription. Written materials were used to identify tonal centres, scale degrees, and modal contours, while oral transmission remained central to the acquisition of stylistic nuance, ornamentation, and expressive vocabulary (Raja Yusof, 2025). This approach aligns with broader ethnomusicological perspectives that view notation as most effective when embedded within an orally grounded learning process rather than imposed as an autonomous system.

My subsequent work on *maqām*-based pedagogy further reinforced this position. In examining the transmission of *çarpma* ornamentation within Malaysian *gambus* practice, I demonstrated how technical and expressive knowledge can be communicated effectively when conceptual explanation is integrated with embodied learning, without undermining oral tradition (Raja Zulkarnain, R. M. Y., 2026a). Similarly, my documentation of the introduction of the seven-course *oud* in Malaysia showed that changes in instrument structure necessitate corresponding shifts in pedagogical explanation and learning materials to support student understanding (Raja Zulkarnain, 2026b). These studies underscore the importance of treating notation as a flexible pedagogical tool that supports, rather than displaces, oral modes of knowledge transmission.

Viewed through this lens, the early use of notation in Malaysian *gambus* learning can be understood as part of a broader reframing of musical knowledge rather than as a departure from tradition. By enabling learners to visualise *maqām* structure and articulate modal relationships, notation supported the development of conscious modal cognition while remaining embedded within an orally rooted learning environment. This conceptualisation provides a critical foundation for examining how *maqām*-based learning practices introduced in 2003 contributed to the transformation of *gambus* pedagogy within Malaysian higher arts education.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design and Approach

This study adopts an autoethnographic research design to examine the early introduction of *maqām*-based learning and notation-mediated practice in Malaysian *gambus* pedagogy in 2003. Autoethnography is employed to document and analyse pedagogical processes that were not formally recorded at the time and for which conventional archival data are limited or absent. As both practitioner and participant, I draw on lived teaching and learning experiences situated within a specific institutional context to reconstruct pedagogical conditions, decisions, and outcomes. This approach is particularly appropriate for examining formative moments in music education where innovation precedes formal documentation and where knowledge transmission occurs through practice rather than policy.

Autoethnography has been widely recognised within ethnomusicology and arts-based research as a legitimate method for investigating embodied knowledge, pedagogical transformation, and insider perspectives that cannot be adequately captured through external observation alone (Nettl, 2005; Racy, 2003). In this study, autoethnography is not used to foreground personal narrative for its own sake, but as an analytical framework through which pedagogical change can be examined reflexively and situated within broader disciplinary discourse.

3.2 Positionality and Research Context

My positionality as a tutor appointed in 2003 to support *gambus* learning at Akademi Seni Kebangsaan is central to the study. At the time, I had recently returned from formal *oud* training in London, where *maqām* was taught as a theoretical and practical system supported by notation, scale analysis, and modal explanation. This pedagogical background contrasted sharply with the prevailing *gambus* learning practices in Malaysia, which were grounded almost entirely in oral transmission and repertoire imitation.

My role was not to replace existing pedagogical traditions, but to support and supplement them within an institutional learning environment. Working alongside an established master practitioner whose authority derived from oral transmission and performance lineage, I occupied a liminal position between inherited tradition and emerging institutional pedagogy. This positionality shaped both the pedagogical interventions introduced and the reflective lens through which they are analysed in this study.

3.3 Data Sources and Analytical Materials

The primary data for this study consist of retrospective pedagogical reflections, teaching notes, early instructional materials, and reconstructed lesson structures developed during the initial phase of *maqām*-based *gambus* learning in 2003. These materials include notated scale exercises, modal diagrams, and explanatory frameworks used to introduce students to *maqāmāt* such as *Ajam*, *Nahawand*, *Rast*, *Kurd*, *Bayātī*, *Hijāz*, *Šabā* and *Sikah* as conceptual systems rather than as repertoire alone. While these materials were not formally archived at the time, they have been preserved through personal records and later pedagogical documentation.

In addition, this study draws on insights developed through subsequent research on *oud* and *gambus* pedagogy, including my autoethnographic analysis of pedagogical institutionalisation (Raja Yusof, 2025), my study of ornamentation transmission through *çarpma* (Raja Zulkarnain, R. M. Y., 2026a), and my documentation of the seven-course *oud* in Malaysia (Raja Zulkarnain, 2026b). These later works are used not as a primary evidence for the 2003 intervention, but as a reflective reference points that clarify the longer-term pedagogical implications of early methodological choices.

3.4 Analytical Framework

Data analysis in this study follows a reflexive thematic approach, focusing on three interrelated dimensions:

1. Pedagogical absence, referring to the lack of structured materials, notation, and theoretical framing prior to 2003.
2. Pedagogical intervention, examining how notation and *maqām*-based explanation were introduced as learning tools within an orally grounded environment.
3. Pedagogical reframing, analysing how these practices contributed to a shift in *gambus* learning from repertoire reproduction toward knowledge-oriented modal understanding.

Rather than seeking generalisability, the analysis aims to produce contextualised insight into how pedagogical change emerges within specific institutional and cultural conditions. This aligns with ethnomusicological approaches that prioritise depth, situated knowledge, and analytical transparency over statistical representation.

3.5 Validity, Reflexivity, and Ethical Considerations

Methodological validity in this study is addressed through reflexive transparency and triangulation with established ethnomusicological literature. I acknowledge the subjective nature of autoethnographic research and position reflexivity as a strength rather than a limitation, allowing pedagogical assumptions and decisions to be examined critically rather than presented as neutral facts. Where possible, claims are contextualised within existing scholarship on oral transmission, *maqām* pedagogy, and notation in musical learning.

Ethical considerations are addressed by focusing on pedagogical processes rather than on individual students, and by avoiding evaluative judgments of specific persons or performances. The study does not disclose personal student data and treats all institutional and pedagogical contexts with respect for inherited traditions and practitioner authority.

4. AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC FINDINGS AND PEDAGOGICAL ANALYSIS

4.1 The Initial Teaching Context and Pedagogical Conditions (2003)

When I began supporting *gambus* learning in 2003 at Akademi Seni

Kebangsaan, the pedagogical environment reflected a continuation of oral, repertoire-centred transmission. Instructional activity focused primarily on learning complete pieces through imitation and repetition, with limited verbal explanation of pitch organisation or modal identity. Students were able to reproduce melodic material accurately, yet their understanding of underlying modal structures remained implicit. Concepts such as tonal centre, scale degree, or modal differentiation were not articulated explicitly within lessons.

At this stage, *maqām* terminology was largely absent from instructional discourse. Students were unfamiliar with the names, characteristics, or pitch structures of commonly used *maqāmāt*, even when performing repertoire that clearly drew upon these modal systems. Learning outcomes were therefore tied closely to memorisation rather than to transferable musical understanding. This condition shaped the pedagogical challenge addressed in the subsequent introduction of *maqām*-based learning.

4.2 Introduction of Maqām as Conceptual Knowledge

The initial pedagogical intervention involved introducing *maqāmāt* as conceptual systems rather than as an implicit features of repertoire. Drawing on my prior *oud* learning, I presented *maqām* as a framework defined by tonal centre, scale structure, and characteristic pitch relationships. Early lessons focused on familiarising students with a limited set of core *maqāmāt*, including *Ajam*, *Nahawand*, *Rast*, *Kurd*, *Bayātī*, *Hijāz*, *Ṣabā* and *Sikah*, selected for their relevance to *gambus* repertoire and pedagogical clarity.

Rather than beginning with complete compositions, I structured learning activities around scale-based exploration and modal recognition. Students were encouraged to identify tonal centres, ascend and descend scale structures, and compare intervallic differences between *maqāmāt*. This shift marked a departure from repertoire-first learning and introduced a conceptual layer through which students could understand melodic material beyond individual pieces.

4.3 Use of Notation as a Pedagogical Scaffold

Written notation was introduced selectively as a pedagogical scaffold to support modal understanding, but its significance extended beyond visual aid alone. Pedagogically, notation transformed tacit modal

knowledge into an explicit cognitive framework through which students could begin to organise pitch relationships, tonal centres, and scalar movement in a more systematic way. Rather than depending exclusively on repeated imitation, learners were gradually able to connect what they heard and played with named modal structures. In this sense, notation did not merely document sound. It functioned as a mediating device that enabled reflection, comparison, and progressive conceptualisation within an otherwise orally grounded learning environment.

Its role remained explanatory rather than prescriptive. I used notation to visualise scale structures, indicate tonal centres, and clarify pitch organisation, while performance practice itself continued to rely on oral demonstration, repetition, and close listening. Ornamentation, phrasing, and expressive nuance were not reduced to notation, but remained embedded in embodied practice. This distinction was important because it allowed notation to assist understanding without displacing the stylistic and performative authority of oral transmission. In practical terms, notation enabled students to identify where a *maqām* began to stabilise around a tonal centre and to compare how one modal structure differed from another. For example, learners who had previously reproduced melodies as an undifferentiated repertoire could now observe that similar melodic passages might belong to different modal systems depending on pitch organisation and emphasis. They could compare the scalar contours of Ajam and Nahawand, or recognise that Bayātī and Hījāz were not simply different tunes but distinct modal frameworks with different internal logics. This did not make students fully independent modal practitioners at once, but it created the conditions for a more systematic pedagogy in which modal learning could be discussed, revisited, and progressively deepened.

The pedagogical value of notation, therefore, lay not in replacing oral tradition but in supporting a hybrid model of learning. It made implicit structures visible enough to be named and analysed, while leaving the cultivation of style and expression within the oral and embodied domain. This was especially significant in an institutional setting, where students were expected not only to imitate but also to understand, remember, and transfer musical knowledge across learning situations.

4.4 Student Responses and Learning Shifts

Student responses to *maqām*-based and notation-supported learning revealed a gradual but important shift in the way musical understanding was formed. At the beginning, most learners approached *gambus* repertoire as a discrete pieces to be memorised. Their musical competence was tied closely to successful reproduction of what had been demonstrated in class, but this competence did not necessarily extend to an ability to explain why a melody moved in a certain way or how one modal structure differed from another. As notation and *maqām*-based explanation were introduced, students began to move from passive reproduction toward more conscious recognition of modal organisation.

One of the clearest shifts was the emergence of tonal awareness. Students began to identify tonic centres more independently and to recognise recurring pitch relationships across different pieces, rather than treating each composition as a wholly separate learning task. In practical classroom terms, this meant that some learners could increasingly point to where a melody appeared to settle, distinguish one modal pattern from another, and follow scale-based exercises with greater conceptual confidence. The learning process became less dependent on total memorisation, as students began to understand the internal structure of what they were playing.

Another significant change involved modal comparison. Once students were introduced to named *maqāmāt* and supported with simple notation-based exercises, they became more able to distinguish broad differences between modal frameworks such as *Ajam*, *Nahawand*, *Rast*, *Bayātī*, and *Hijāz*. This did not imply advanced theoretical mastery, but it did indicate that modal identity was no longer entirely implicit. Students started to develop a shared vocabulary for discussing what they were hearing and performing. That shared vocabulary was pedagogically important because it allowed musical knowledge to circulate in a more reflective and transferable manner.

The most meaningful transformation, however, was the shift from piece-bound learning to system-based thinking. Students were no longer confined to the logic of one composition at a time, but began to understand that repertoire could reflect larger modal principles. In some cases, this was evidenced by their ability to identify tonal centres with reduced prompting, to follow structured modal exercises more independently, and to attempt basic exploratory melodic movement within a specific *maqām* framework after guided notation-based practice. Even at an elementary level, this indicated that learning had moved beyond simple imitation toward the early formation of modal cognition.

This shift should not be overstated as a complete transformation achieved immediately or uniformly by all learners. Rather, it marked the beginning of a pedagogical reorientation. Oral imitation remained central, but it was no longer the sole mechanism through which students accessed *gambus* knowledge. The addition of notation and conceptual explanation created new pathways for systematic progression, learner reflection, and transfer of understanding across repertoire. It was this change in the nature of learning, rather than the mere introduction of written materials, that made the 2003 intervention pedagogically significant.

4.5 Pedagogical Implications of the 2003 Intervention

The findings of this autoethnographic analysis indicate that the early introduction of *maqām*-based learning and notation-mediated explanation contributed to a reframing of *gambus* pedagogy within higher arts education. By making modal structure explicit, the intervention addressed pedagogical limitations associated with exclusive reliance on oral transmission, without undermining its cultural or expressive value. Learning was repositioned as both embodied and conceptual, integrating practice with reflective understanding.

This early pedagogical moment laid the groundwork for later developments in Malaysian *gambus* and *oud* education, including the expansion of curricular content, the introduction of new instrumental configurations, and the refinement of ornamentation pedagogy. While the scope of this study is limited to the formative period of 2003, its findings underscore the importance of contextualised, reflexive pedagogical innovation in the transmission of orally rooted musical traditions.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study contribute to broader scholarly discussions on pedagogy, knowledge transmission, and the role of notation in orally rooted musical traditions. Ethnomusicological literature has long emphasised that oral transmission is not merely a pedagogical technique but a cultural logic through which musical meaning, authority, and expression are sustained. In this sense, the Malaysian *gambus* tradition prior to 2003 was not pedagogically deficient in absolute terms, but historically aligned with a mode of learning in which musical knowledge remained embedded in performance, memory, and demonstration. However, the findings of this study suggest that when such traditions enter higher arts education, the pedagogical demands of institutional learning begin to exceed what oral transmission alone can consistently support.

This point becomes clearer when placed in dialogue with existing scholarship. Touma (1996) and Marcus (2007) both show that *maqām* knowledge has often been transmitted through oral and practice-based means, and Racy (2003) similarly highlights the centrality of embodied musical understanding in Arab art music traditions. My findings do not contradict these observations. Rather, they extend them by showing that within Malaysian higher arts education, the institutional setting generated a need for a hybrid pedagogical model in which oral learning remained central but was supplemented by notation-based conceptual support. In other words, the study demonstrates that the oral transmission of *maqām* may remain culturally authoritative while still requiring

auxiliary pedagogical tools when recontextualised within formal education.

The introduction of *maqām* as conceptual knowledge also aligns with broader understandings of modal systems as cognitive frameworks rather than simply collections of melodies. Previous studies of Arab and Turkish music have shown that performers with clearer modal awareness are better positioned to navigate improvisation, modulation, and interpretive decision-making. What this study adds is a pedagogical example of how such awareness begins to form in an institutional context where students initially lack theoretical vocabulary and structural orientation. The shift observed here was not simply from orality to notation, but from tacit and piece-bound musical familiarity to an emerging capacity to think in terms of modal systems.

This analytical distinction is important. A descriptive reading might say only that notation-based *maqām* learning marked a significant shift in *gambus* pedagogy. A more critical interpretation, however, is that the pedagogical significance of notation lay in its ability to convert unarticulated modal familiarity into explicit cognitive frameworks. Through that process, students were able to relate pitch organisation to named systems, compare *maqāmāt* more consciously, and begin transferring modal understanding across repertoire. The intervention therefore did not just add materials to an existing teaching environment. It altered the epistemic structure of learning by making musical knowledge more discussable, revisitable, and progressively teachable.

The use of notation as a pedagogical scaffold further contributes to debates regarding notation in oral traditions. Nettl (2005) and Racy (2003) caution against treating notation as a substitute for oral transmission, and this caution remains valid. My findings support that view. The effectiveness of notation in this study depended precisely on its limited and reflexive role. It was not used to standardise performance or fix expressive meaning, but to clarify tonal centres, scalar relationships, and

modal pathways that otherwise remained implicit. This suggests that the pedagogical value of notation in orally rooted musics is contingent not on notation itself, but on how it is framed, restricted, and integrated into embodied learning.

From a methodological perspective, the study also demonstrates the usefulness of autoethnography for reconstructing formative pedagogical moments that predate systematic institutional documentation. In the absence of archived syllabi, assessment rubrics, or formal lesson plans from that early stage, autoethnography provides access to the lived pedagogical logic through which change was initiated. This does not produce statistical generalisability, but it does yield historically situated insight into how innovation emerges from practice, particularly in arts education contexts where pedagogical transformation often precedes formal recognition.

Importantly, the findings also complicate linear narratives of pedagogical modernisation. The 2003 intervention should not be understood as the replacement of tradition by theory, or of orality by notation. Rather, it constituted a negotiated pedagogical adjustment in which the strengths of oral transmission were retained while its limitations within an institutional learning environment were partially addressed. The significance of this early moment lies not in its rejection of inherited practice, but in its demonstration that orally rooted traditions can be pedagogically expanded without surrendering their cultural integrity. For this reason, the study contributes to a more nuanced account of how *gambus* learning was reframed in Malaysia, and how modal knowledge may be transmitted more effectively when oral and notation-based approaches are allowed to operate in complementary relationship.

This study therefore contributes to ethnomusicology by demonstrating how *maqām* pedagogy can transition from tacit oral transmission to structured institutional knowledge without disrupting cultural continuity.

6. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study has documented and analysed an early pedagogical intervention that introduced *maqām*-based learning and notation-mediated explanation into Malaysian *gambus* education in 2003. Through autoethnographic analysis, it has shown how the reframing of *gambus* learning from exclusively oral, repertoire-centred transmission toward a knowledge-oriented approach enabled greater modal awareness, conceptual understanding, and pedagogical flexibility within higher arts education.

The findings suggest that treating *maqām* as musical knowledge, rather than as implicit performance content, has significant implications for *gambus* pedagogy. When learners are equipped with conceptual tools to understand modal structure, they are better positioned to transfer knowledge across repertoire, engage in improvisatory practices, and articulate musical understanding beyond imitation. The selective use of notation, framed as a pedagogical scaffold rather than as a prescriptive system, further supports this process by making implicit musical relationships visible and discussable.

From an institutional perspective, the study highlights the importance of context-sensitive pedagogical innovation. The introduction of new learning frameworks must respond to existing traditions, learner needs, and educational structures rather than replicate external models uncritically. The 2003 intervention illustrates how pedagogical change can emerge organically from practice when informed by reflexive awareness and respect for inherited musical knowledge.

The implications of this study extend beyond the Malaysian *gambus* context. For educators working with orally rooted musical traditions in institutional settings, the findings underscore the potential of integrating conceptual explanation and selective notation to support deeper learning without undermining cultural integrity. Methodologically, the study affirms autoethnography

as a valid and necessary approach for documenting pedagogical histories that would otherwise remain undocumented.

While the scope of this article is intentionally limited to an early formative moment, it provides a foundation for future research on the long-term impact of *maqām*-based pedagogy, comparative studies across regional traditions, and further exploration of how notation can function as a pedagogical tool in modal music education. By articulating this early reframing of *gambus* learning, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how tradition, pedagogy, and knowledge transmission interact within contemporary higher arts education.

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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.