

FROM GABBANG TO GABANG: THE DIFFUSION AND TRANSFORMATION OF A PHILIPPINE XYLOPHONE AMONG INDIGENOUS PAITANIC COMMUNITIES OF SABAH, MALAYSIA

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22452/brj.vol11no1.7>

Abstract

Musical instruments are objects of material culture and, as sound producers used to create music, are also part of the intangible cultural heritage of communities. Some instruments are local inventions, while others have been diffused into indigenous cultures through outside contacts. During the process of diffusion, instruments may undergo structural transformations due to the use of local materials. Terms used for the parts of the diffused instrument and also the music played may also change over time in accordance with local aesthetics and contexts. The focus of this article is the diffusion and transformation of the *nibung* palmwood or bamboo keyed *gabbang* xylophone of the Sama' Bajau and Suluk communities along the east coast of Sabah, the east Malaysian state on northern Borneo, into the wooden *gabang* of the indigenous Makiang people of the Upper Kinabatangan River. The *gabbang* originated from Bajau and Suluk (Taosug) cultures in the southern Philippines. The discussion here compares and contrasts the structure, nomenclature and performance technique of the Makiang *gabang* with the *gabbang* to identify the physical transformation that the instrument has undergone. It also examines the *gabang* repertoire and discusses a musical example to show how this transformed xylophone has been utilised to produce music according to Makiang contexts and practices. This illustrates how ideas and objects can cross cultural borders to eventually develop into traditions in the receiving culture.

Keywords: *gabbang, gabang, idiophones, xylophone music, Makiang, Paitanic peoples, Sabah*

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Introduction

During processes of cultural contact and exchange, material objects and elements of intangible cultural heritage can be transmitted from one culture complex to another and adapted to suit local environments and needs. Musical instruments are both objects of material culture and, as sound producers, parts of the intangible cultural heritage of a community (Malm 2005, pp. 5-6). Their structures and performance techniques may be shaped by local materials and methods, while performance contexts, music, and aesthetics are socially determined (Blacking, 1995, p. 33).

The focus of this discussion is the diffusion and development of the wooden *gabang* xylophone of the indigenous Makiang people of the Kinabatangan River from the *nibung* palmwood or bamboo keyed *gabbang* (/bb/ indicates a hard /b/) of the Sama' Bajau and Suluk communities along the east coast of Sabah. Xylophones are idiophones formed from a series of bars of various sizes laid horizontally on a frame, which are struck with a pair of beaters. Metal xylophones are found mainly among coastal cultures that use the *kulintangan* (row of gong chimes or small kettle gongs on a frame), such as the *sarun* or *salun* among the Iranun, Dusun Tindal and Lotud, the *kuintangan* among the Kadazan of Papar on the west coast, and on the east coast the *gelundang* of the Tidong. These metal xylophones usually play the *kulintangan* repertoire of the culture in question, and are sometimes regarded as a "poor man's *kulintangan*" because they can be played in gong ensembles like the more expensive gong chime sets. The *nibung* wood or bamboo *gabbang* of the east coast Bajau and Suluk, however, is a solo classical instrument with its own distinctive tuning and repertoire (Pugh-Kitingan, 2010).

In comparing and contrasting the *gabbang* with the *gabang*, various questions arise. What are the similarities and differences in structure, nomenclature, and tunings between the two instruments? Are there differences in performance techniques? Are there differences in the repertoire? What are the similarities and differences in the context of performance? And, is the *gabang* a solo instrument like the *gabbang*, or is it sometimes played with other instruments? Before pursuing these questions, the geographical, historical and cultural backgrounds to the diffusion of the instruments must be understood.

Contextual Setting

Geographically, the eastern part of Sabah is characterised by extensive river systems that flow down from Sabah's inland mountainous backbone and meander across vast alluvial plains to the sea. These include the Paitan, the

Sugut (Labuk), the Kinabatangan, and the Segama. For thousands of years, these rivers have sustained ancient inland indigenous societies and have functioned as conduits connecting these peoples with coastal communities. Jars, brassware, certain musical instruments such as gongs and other objects found their way inland from the coast via the rivers, while inland produce, forest products, and artifacts came down to the coast.

The Kinabatangan River, known as the Milian in the Upper Kinabatangan language, is the longest river in Sabah. Indigenous communities in its remote upper reaches include the Tangara Murut, speakers of various Paitanic languages including the Upper Kinabatangan language and its dialects Kalabuan, Makiang, Sinabu', Sinarupa and Kuamut, speakers of Dusunic languages including Labuk-Kinabatangan Dusun, and the Ida'an living further downstream around Bilit. These diverse peoples living along the Kinabatangan River are sometimes generally known as *Orang Sungai* or "river people", although the Upper Kinabatangan Paitanic peoples do not use this term. The gloss *Orang Sungai* or *Sungai* is also applied to Paitanic peoples and others living along other eastern rivers of Sabah.

Traditionally, each river tributary in the Upper Kinabatangan area functioned as an extended village with its distinct dialect. Possibly, the most widely dispersed Paitanic community along the Kinabatangan is the Makiang, located upstream from the Tongod area to Kota Kinabatangan and Bukit Garam further downstream. Like other indigenous communities in Sabah, these people have egalitarian societies with bilateral kinship; they traditionally lived in sedentary villages composed of longhouses and practiced various forms of rice cultivation.

East coast societies include other Paitanic communities, as well as speakers of the three dialects of Ida'an (Ida'an, Bega'ak and Subpan, the latter formerly misnamed "Dusun" Segama) of Lahad Datu District, the Tidung (related to the Murutic Family), various regional Sama' Bajau communities, the Iranun of Lahad Datu, some Brunei, Chinese and the Suluk (Taosug). Of these, the Iranun, Brunei, and Suluk were hierarchical societies, formerly engaged in trade with east coast communities, including birds' nests from the Ida'an. This east coastal cultural mosaic has been further complicated by the recent influx of illegal and legal immigrants, including more recent Suluk and Sama' peoples from the Philippines, and the Bugis, Toraja, and others from Indonesia.

Historically, the coastal areas of northern Borneo were administered by the Sultanate of Brunei, while indigenous peoples of the interior were largely free from outside control. In 1658, the Sultan of Brunei gave part of the north east coast of Borneo to the Sultan of Sulu, head of one of its vassal states, in return for help in settling a civil war. Although they did not administer this

area as colonists, the Suluk established trading posts near the river mouths on the east coast, and sometimes further upstream to places like Bukit Garam. The following centuries saw the decline of Brunei and Sulu, and the eventual establishment of the North Borneo Company administration in 1882 (Sabah Museum, 1992, pp. 7-11). Nevertheless, Sulu cultural influence can be seen among east coastal communities, especially in terms of music and musical instruments, while Brunei and Iranun influence is stronger among west coastal cultures.

The *Gabbang*

As shown previously (Pugh-Kitingan, 2010), the *gabbang* is said to have originated from the Suluk (Taosug) of the southern Philippines and is played among the various Sama' Bajau communities and the Suluk of the east coast of Sabah. It consists of an ornately painted, asymmetrical wooden, box-like frame or *papagan gabbang* (around 30 cm high in the middle), with carved ends that are inlaid with mirrors, and has up to seventeen narrow slats or keys, made from *nibung* palm or bamboo, across the top. Sometimes, sixteen keys are used, and a seventeenth longer one is stored inside the *papagan* for use in certain musical pieces. These keys have the same width (around 2.5 cm), but are of different lengths which determine their pitches (the longer the key, the lower the pitch). Each key sits on a nail on the opposite side from the performer and lies between two nails close to the performer to prevent it from jumping over other keys when hit. The keys are struck with a pair of beaters or *titik* that have carved heads (Photo 1). This instrument differs slightly from *gabbang* from the southern Philippines, which can have from fourteen to twenty keys (Fernando-Amilbangsa, 1983, p. 188).

Among the Bajau Kubang of Semporna, the larger end of the frame is called the *kok gabbang* (head of the *gabbang*), and the smaller end is the *tape gabbang* (foot of the *gabbang*). The longest key lies near the *kok gabbang* and is named *onggok gabbang* (mother of the *gabbang*), while all the other keys are called *anak gabbang* (children of the *gabbang*). The *palinduan* or "starting tone" in a piece of music can be one of the three or four keys after the *onggok gabbang*. The *kok gabbang* and *onggok gabbang* always lie near the main hand of the performer. Thus, if the *gabbang* is for a right handed performer, the longer lower pitched keys lie near the right hand end of the instrument and are hit with the right hand. If a left handed performer plays a right handed *gabbang*, he or she will turn the instrument around and hit it from the other side, so that the lower pitches are played with the left hand. Otherwise, a left handed performer will play a left handed *gabbang* that has been constructed with the

kok gabbang and *ongkok gabbang* on the left. This arrangement has significant implications for transcription and analysis of *gabbang* music, since the lower pitches of the instrument are played by the main hand of the performer (Pugh-Kitingan 2010, pp. 126-138).

Photo 1: Hajah Rokiah bte Abe playing her *gabbang* at Kg. Kabimbangan, Bumbum Island, Semporna, 28 January 2005



Source: Jacqueline Pugh-Kitingan

Unlike the anhemitonic pentatonic tunings of most north Borneo instruments, *gabbang* tunings consist of a series of descending whole tones and semitones across a span of two octaves. Not all the pitches are used in every musical piece, however, and older pieces may have pentatonic melodies while new ones sound more diatonic (Pugh-Kitingan, 2010, p. 130).

The instrument is played by both men and women in both social and ritual contexts. Its performance is essentially solo, but sometimes a second player may hit the edge of the frame with a small stick.

Gabbang performance is highly regarded as a skilled artistic pursuit. Among the Bajau Kubang, for example, the *gabbang* is an important item of a family's *langkapan*, a collection of spiritually powerful heirlooms that has been handed down from their ancestors. A *gabbang* must be taken care of to ensure that it is not damaged. It is believed that if it is broken, even accidentally, this will invite a curse on the family from the ancestors.

In social contexts, it can accompany secular singing, story recitation and dancing (*igal*). This practice of singing with the *gabbang* is called *angongka gabbang*. The *mag-lugu*, a special melismatic epic chant that recalls the migration of the Bajau Kubang from their island of origin, is often accompanied by *gabbang* performance. In serious ritual contexts, such as *panansang* a solemn ceremony to exorcise a *syaitan* or demon causing serious illness, the *gabbang* may be played to accompany singing as a last resort to placate the evil spirit.

Each *gabbang* performer develops his or her own repertoire, which can include up to twelve or more named pieces or *titik*. Some performers create their own compositions or variations on existing pieces. During major social gatherings such as wedding celebrations or circumcisions when people from many villages come together, various *gabbang* players take turns to show off their skills as performers. In this way, different musical pieces are exchanged among families and across islands and ethnic groups. The repertoire of a Bajau Kubang performer, for example, may include *titik* from other Bajau Kubang villages, as well as from Sama' Dilaut (Sea Bajau) and Suluk communities, together with a couple of *kulintangan* pieces (Pugh-Kitingan, 2010, pp. 125, 131-135).

The *Gabang* and Its Music

The *gabang* of the Makiang from the Upper Kinabatangan, especially those living around the Kota Kinabatangan and Bukit Garam area, is made from heavy *tombirog* wood. It has an undecorated, unpainted asymmetrical frame also called *papagan* with carved chevron-shaped ends. At around 19 cm high in the middle, this is lower than the east coast *gabbang*. The *gabang* has nine or ten thick, heavy, semi-rounded wooden keys called *dila no gabang* (around 6 m wide) that are laid across the frame without nails. These keys are hit with thin spatula-like beaters called *tititik* or *lilisag* made from *dorom* wood (Photo 2).

The keys are arranged with the longest and deepest sounding one on the performer's left moving up to the shortest on the right. This appears to be the standard arrangement, regardless of whether the performer is right handed or left handed. On a nine-keyed *gabang*, the longest key is called *ino'* or "mother," while the shortest is labelled *anak bungsu* ("youngest child"). A tenth key called *amo'* ("father"), longer than the *ino'*, is stored inside the *papagan*, and brought out and played with the others if the music requires it.

Photo 2: Puan Mastiah Mokmin playing *gabang* during a visit to Likas, 18 May 1989



Source: Pugh-Kitingan (2004, p. 92)

The *gabang* is normally played for entertainment by both men and women in non-ritual contexts, and often as an accompaniment to dancing. It can be played solo, but is usually accompanied by two or more slit gongs or *kantung* made from *tombirog* hardwood. These are stood vertically and struck with thin mallets or *papankul* made from *tagas* wood (Photo 3). The taller deeper sounding *kantung* (around 111.5 cm high) is called *ino*’ or “mother,” while the second (around 94 cm high) is labelled *anak* or “child”. This ensemble of *gabang* and two *kantung* is known as *sampasang no gabang*, and sometimes includes a small bamboo slit gong called *tolutuk* that is also hit with a *papankul*. Sometimes two gongs may accompany the *gabang* instead of the two *kantung*.

Photo 3: *Sampasang No Gabang* ensemble of *gabang* with two *kantung* slit gongs

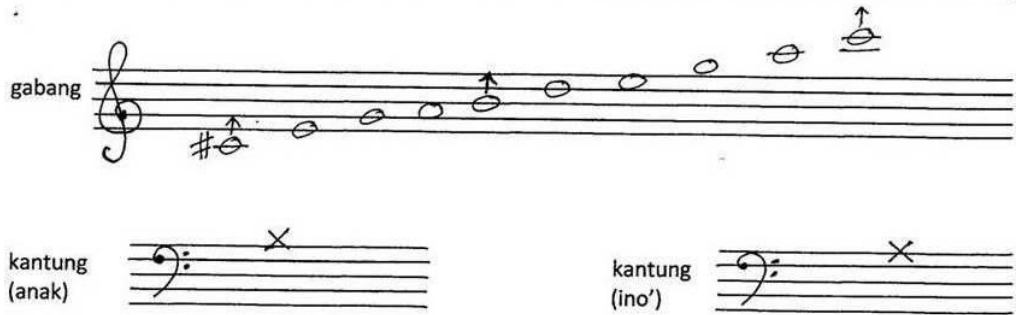


Source: Pugh-Kitingan (2004, p. 93)

As shown in Figure 1, the *gabang* has an anhemitonic pentatonic tuning across two octaves. Each *kantung* produces a loud wooden sound when struck. Unlike the *gabang*, their pitches are not clear, but the *anak* sounds roughly a whole tone higher than the *ino*'.

The *gabang* repertoire consists of three pieces: *Titikas*, *Titik Lumambai*, and *Titik Mangalai*, where *Titikas*, *Lumambai* and *Mangalai* are three kinds of dance. Figure 2 shows the start of the piece *Titikas*. Here, the *gabang* motifs are built around the recurring rhythmic pattern of four semiquavers followed by a quaver and two semiquavers. The basic melodic phrase features a repeated or rising motif on the first four semiquavers, with the characteristic falling interval of a minor third from the highest pitch on the quaver beat. The melody moves motif by motif down the *dila no gabang* to the lower-pitched keys, then slowly rises back to the highest pitched keys. Throughout this process, the right-hand strikes most of the upper pitches in each motif, with the left hand intervening on the lower pitches of each phrase. The two hands cooperate throughout but do not cross.

Figure 1: Tunings of *Sampasang No Gabang* ensemble from Kota Kinabatangan



Source: Jacqueline Pugh-Kitingan

Figure 2: The opening phrases of “*Titikas*” by *Sampasang No Gabang* ensemble from Kota Kinabatangan

“*Titikas*” by *Sampasang no Gabang* Ensemble from Kota Kinabatangan (PUG-KIT Asrama Likas 890518/3)

$\text{♩} = 200\text{MM}$

(12sec.)

Source: Jacqueline Pugh-Kitingan

In this piece, the two *kantung* are struck in unison and beat out the basic rhythmic motif of the *gabang*, while in other pieces they play separate parts in a

composite rhythm. Their usage here recalls the supportive parts played by two or three large hanging gongs or *agung* that support *kulintangan* music in the Makiang *sampasang no kulintangan* gong ensemble. Similar large *agung* or *agong* gongs support the *kulintangan* in other inland indigenous communities along the eastern rivers, as well as the *tagunggu'* gong ensembles of the east coastal Sama Bajau and Suluk. This suggests that *gabang* performance practice may have been influenced by that of the *kulintangan* among the Makiang.

Conclusions

From the foregoing, it can be seen that the Makiang *gabang* is an adaptation of the *gabbang* which came from Suluk and Sama' Bajau cultures, originally from the southern Philippines. While there is very little difference between the delicate lightweight east coast Bajau *gabbang* and that of the Philippines, apart from the number of keys, the heavier wooden *gabang* of the Makiang has undergone a structural transformation due to the use of local wood.

While the conceptual use of kinship terminology in the different languages to label the keys, and the storage of an extra longer key inside the *papagan* is similar for both instruments, the rounded *gabang* keys are made from heavy wood, not *nibung* or bamboo. Hence, they do not jump around when hit, and remain in place without the use of nails. There are only nine or ten keys, instead of sixteen or seventeen like the Bajau instrument. The *gabang* frame is also lower, and its carved ends are different from the ornate square ends of the *gabbang* frame that are usually inlaid with mirrors.

The arrangement of the keys on the two instruments is very different. The lower-pitched keys at the larger end of the *gabbang* are always placed near the main hand of the performer, whereas on the *gabang*, the keys run from the lowest at the performer's left to highest at the right hand. This affects the psychomotor aspects of performance. In *gabbang* performance, the lower starting pitch is normally at the main hand of the performer, whereas for the *gabang* this is not necessarily the case. This change appears to be a Makiang innovation that may have also been influenced by *kulintangan* practice, although some *kulintangan* may be arranged with lower-pitched kettle gongs on the performer's right.

Both instruments are performed by skilled virtuosi at important social events or for personal entertainment in the home. The Sama Bajau *gabbang*, however, can also be played in the serious ritual context of their *panansang* healing exorcism.

As a spiritually powerful heirloom, a *gabbang* must be handled carefully to avoid bringing a curse from the ancestors on the family. Although

the Bajau Kubang are Muslims, this belief continues today. This, however, is not the case with the *gabang* among the Makiang whose traditional religion did not invoke ancestral spirits and who today are mostly Christians in the Upper Kinabatangan area with more Muslims further downstream.

The east coast *gabbang* accompanies singing and dancing and has a large repertoire of *titik* or musical pieces, many of which are exchanged and copied among performers. The Makiang *gabang* has its own repertoire of three *titik* to accompany dances that can also be played without dancing.

Unlike the *gabbang*, which is essentially a solo instrument, the *gabang* may be played solo but is usually played in the Makiang *sampasang no gabang* ensemble with other instruments, especially two *kantung* or vertical wooden slit gongs. The use of the *kantung* recalls the role of the large *agung* hanging gongs in the Makiang *sampasang no kulintangan* ensemble, suggesting the influence of *kulintangan* performance on the *gabang*.

This development of the *gabang* and its music as a distinctive genre of Paitanic intangible cultural heritage illustrates how ideas and objects can cross cultural borders and eventually become traditions in the receiving culture. The instrument is now a recognised part of Makiang and wider *Orang Sungai* culture, and is different from the *gabbang* of the Suluk and east coast Bajau, and that of the Philippines.

Today, *gabbang* performance is declining among east coastal communities due to inroads made by popular Philippine music and electrical instruments, with *organ* the electric keyboard supported by band instruments, increasingly taking the place of the *gabang* and also the *kulintangan*. Among Paitanic communities, however, the Makiang *gabang* has developed as distinctive *Orang Sungai* music. It has been promoted by Encik Ayub Imbau (Photo 3, left) and his family from Kota Kinabatangan among other communities, including youths from the Abai Sungai society of the lower Kinabatangan River.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to acknowledge SEASREP and the Kadazandusun Chair, Universiti Malaysia Sabah for their generous grants, GTA00032 (Kulintangan Music and Dance Traditions of Sabah) and E0000N-4 (Music, Dance and Ritual Processes in the Magduwata Kabusungan Rituals of the Bajau Kubang of Semporna, Sabah) respectively, and all individuals involved in this research project especially the Bajau and the Makiang communities. These research projects would not have been able to take off without all their assistance. This

paper is based on the presentation “From *Gabbang* to *Gabang*: xylophones and their performance from east coastal communities to the Makiang of the Upper Kinabatangan River, Sabah, Malaysia” that was presented by the author at the UMS – TUFs Exchange Lecture, on 7 March 2014 at the then School of Social Sciences (now Faculty of Humanities, Arts and Heritage), Universiti Malaysia Sabah.

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