

The Kedah and Perak Nobat

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In the years which have passed since Merdeka many people all over Malaya have become aware of the existence and significance of the Nobat—the royal ceremonial band which is played at the installation of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong.

Prior to 1957 it is probable that the name and the sound of these historic instruments was only familiar to those living in the royal towns of Kuala Kangsar, Alor Star, Klang and Kuala Trengganu where the four royal bands are to be found, housed respectively in the palaces of the Sultan of Perak, Kedah, Selangor and Trengganu.

The two oldest are the Nobat of Kedah and Perak both of which can be traced back for over four centuries. The first reference to the Kedah Nobat occurs in the Malay Annals (Sejarah Melayu) which, though written down in about 1650, describes events in the 15th century in Malacca including the

use of the Nobat in the reign of Sultan Muhammad Shah in about 1435. The Annals also record that the royal band was first instituted by the Queen of Bentan and that she invested the founder of Singapore, Seri Teri Buana, with a Nobat.

We can also read in the Malay Annals how the ruler of Kedah came to Malacca during the reign of Sultan Mahmud (before he was defeated and driven out by the Portuguese) and was given a set of the traditional instruments which make up a Nobat, and when a son of Sultan Mahmud was invited to become the first Sultan of Perak, after the fall of Malacca, he may be presumed to have taken a Nobat with him and to have been installed in 1528 A.D. to the sound of its drums and wind instruments.

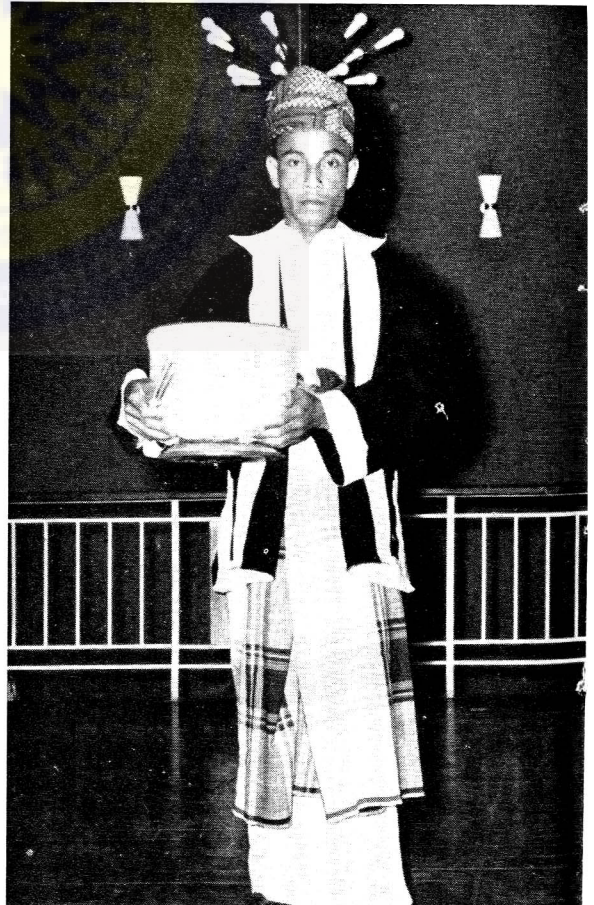
After this lapse of time it is not surprising to find that the composition of this royal band is different in each state.

The Kedah Nobat playing at the Istana Negara. May 1962.





*The Head of the Kedah royal Bandsmen—
 Kalur Besar—Che Daud bin Sha'ari—with
 the Maha Guru.*

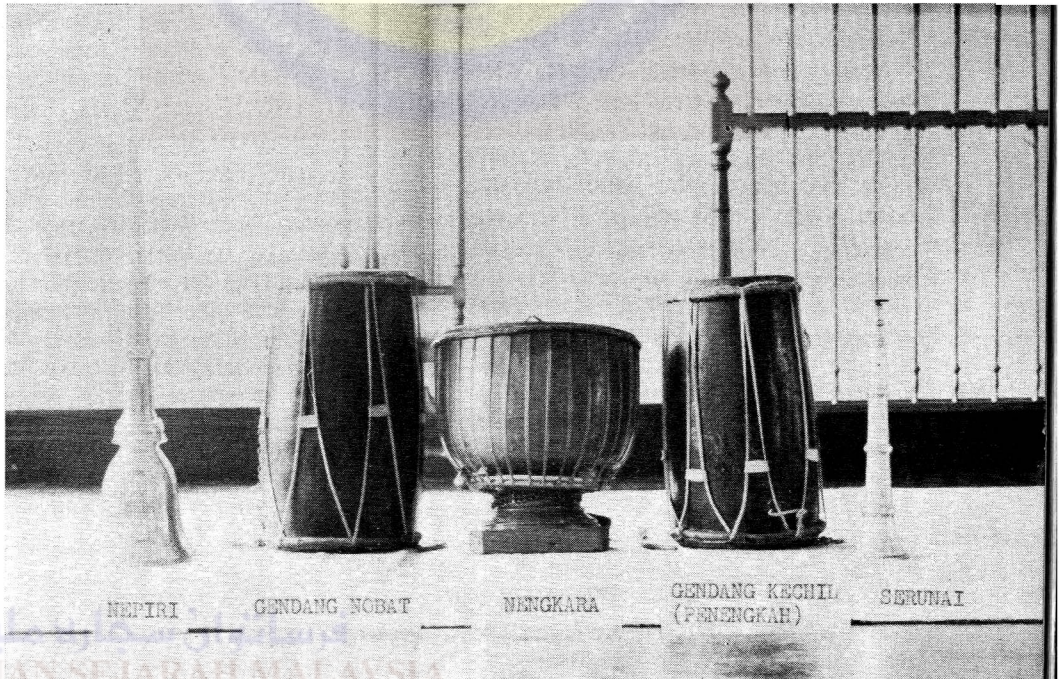


*Enche Mustafa bin Noh the Kedah Nahara
 player, with the Nahara.*



*Enche Sha'ari bin Mat Isa the Kedah
 Serunai player, with the Serunai.*

THE PERAK NOBAT (five instruments) at the Istana Iskandaria, Kuala Kangsar.



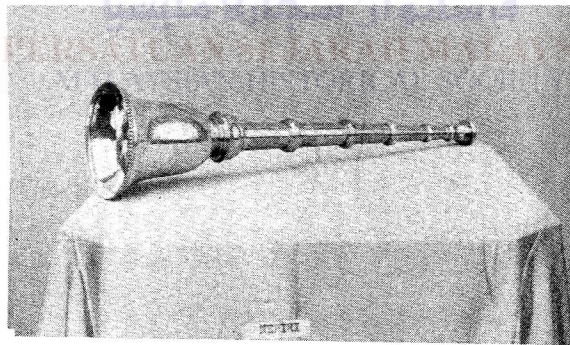
In Kedah, which can justly claim to have the longest tradition of possessing the Nobat, the band consists of six articles:— One Negara played with two small canes, two Gendang (hand beaten wooden drums of Indian type about 20 inches long and 13½ inches in diameter covered at both ends), one Nafiri (a long trumpet made of silver 33 inches long), one small flute (serunai) 17 inches long, one Gong and a long bamboo staff, called Maha Guru, 5 feet 11 inches long, wrapped in royal yellow, which though solely ornamental must be present when ever the band is played.

The band leader is the guardian of the long staff, but the tempo is set and maintained by the player of the Negara.

In Perak there are only five instruments: the Nenkara (Negara), a larger drum than that in Kedah, it is 15½ inches in diameter and 15 inches high, two Gendang, the Gendang Nobat (29 inches long and 12 inches in diameter) and the Gendang Kechil (18½ inches long and 11 inches in diameter). One Nefiri, a finely ornamented silver trumpet 2 feet 7 inches long, and one Serunai (flute) 16 inches long, made of horn but silver plated.

In Perak, as in Kedah, the Nenkara (Negara) drum is considered the principal instrument, but in Perak unlike Kedah, the Nenkara player is the Senior member of the band and its leader.

The Perak Nengkara.



The Perak Nefiri.

In both states the members of the royal band are hereditary holders of their positions, and the honour of playing the various instruments has been handed down from father to son since time immemorial.

In Kedah the leader has the title of Kalur Besar, next in seniority is the Penghulu and third in importance is the Kalur Kechil, the other members are simply called 'Orang Nobat'.

In Perak there are no special names for the individual members of the band, but they are all referred to as 'Orang Kalur or Kalau'. The leader has the traditional title of 'Dato Sri Guna'. The orang Nobat and the orang Kalur are members of His Highness the Sultan's palace staff in the two states and are responsible for the care and cleaning of the instruments. The occasions on which the royal band is played in public are infrequent.

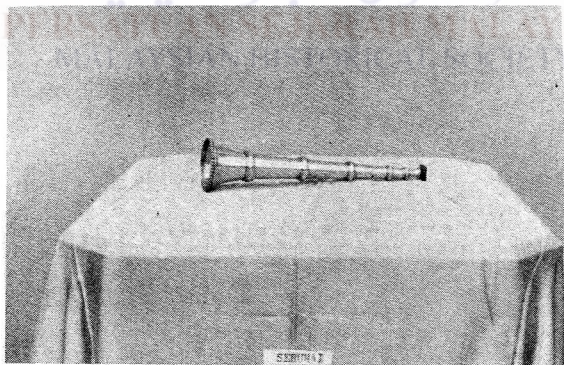
The most important and historic is the installation of the Ruler. The Malay Annals makes it clear that as far back as the fifteenth century the full Nobat was only played in the presence of a ruling sultan or to instal a successor, and it has been the hall mark of effective inheritance ever since the era of the Malacca dynasty. No ruler of Kedah or Perak who was not installed to the sound of the drums, the trumpet and the clarinet was considered legitimate. We read of how the first Sultan of Selangor, Sultan Ibrahim, went to Perak in about 1772

to be installed with the ceremonial sanction of the Perak Nobat, and thereafter the Selangor royal family was authorised to possess a Nobat of their own.

The music played by this unique group of instruments has also been handed down for centuries though it has never been written down. The complex combinations of resonant drum beating and eerie trumpeting may not accord closely to the modern conception of a 'tune' but in Kedah, at least ten distinct arrangements still survive which are called 'Man', each of which has a name and a particular significance. The names are Lagu Genderang Perang, Lagu Belayar, Raja Burong, Lagu Sepindin, Lagu Lumat (or Lamat), Lagu Gendang Ana, Lagu Sedau-na, Lagu Melau-la, Lagu Mambang Berkayoh, and Lagu Berlimau.

In Kedah apart from various royal occasions and ceremonies, the royal band also plays for about five minutes to signal the breaking of the Muslim Fast each evening at about 7 o'clock during the Fasting Month. They play in their special Nobat Tower which stands on the grassy lawn between the Sultan's office and the State Mosque in Alor Star. At one time, when the Sultan lived in the old palace behind the Balai Besar, the Kedah Nobat was played on the balcony over the main entrance gate.

Nobat, Kalur, Man: These are strange words not to be found in a modern Malay Dictionary: What do they mean? Nobat, which should be spelt and pronounced Naubat, is probably derived from the Persian words Nau=nine and Bat=items. The traditional number of instruments used in the royal band was eight and the leader of the band brought the total to nine. The word and the band it



The Perak Serunai.

described were also found in India and the Naubat was used by both Hindus and Muslims there before the Muslim ruler of Pasai in Sumatra was 'drummed', on his conversion to Islam in the 14th century.

'Orang Kalur or Kalau', may be the successors of the ancient court genealogists, the Keepers of the royal family records. 'Galur' is an obsolete Malay word meaning 'the tracing of anything from beginning to end' and 'Meng-galur-galur' used to mean 'to investigate antecedents'. 'Man'—which is probably of Sanskrit origin, is also a Cham word meaning an incantation. The Sanskrit word 'Mantara' means 'magical incantations', and it is believed that incantations were intoned to the accompaniment of the Nobat drums and wind instruments. Later the use of the intoned sentences was discontinued but the accompaniment (Man) of the band was preserved much as we hear it today.

The Nobat has been filmed and broadcast. It has become a familiar sight and sound to thousands of people of all communities in Malaya. History, centuries old, survives through the patient skill of the Orang Kalur. Is this the last generation of a long and privileged line or may we hope that among the youths of the 1960's one or two will be found to study the unrecorded rhythms and transmit them to posterity?