

## **DISTANT DRUMS AND THUNDEROUS CANNON: SOUNDING AUTHORITY IN TRADITIONAL MALAY SOCIETY<sup>1</sup>**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Pre-modern Malay society was intensely oral and aural, and the texts that are now read were always intended for group recitation and performance. Studies of auditory history in other societies have emphasised that in the past, sounds were experienced differently from the way they are heard today. At the very basic level, thunder—the voice of the heavens—established the benchmark and the basis for comparison for awe-inspiring sounds that humans could attempt to replicate, notably in the beating of drums and the firing of cannon. Together with the nose-flute, the drum is the oldest and most indigenous Malay instrument, and the drums that were included in royal regalia were accorded personalities of their own. Cannon were introduced much later, but quickly assumed a preeminent position as personified embodiments of extraordinary supernatural power registered in the awe-inspiring noise of their thunder-like firing. At the same time, the sounds of*

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*both cannon and drums were fused with their physical presence as representations of fertility to create a complex sensory experience, conveying messages that were central to the functioning of the society. This paper argues that in the pre-modern Malay soundscape, drums and cannon functioned as visual and aural proclamations of identity, helping to define the community's cultural parameters by drawing elite and commoner together.*

**Keywords:** auditory history, cannon, drums, identity, authority

## INTRODUCTION

The cultural weight attached to verbal prowess and the prestige enjoyed by those famed for their oral skills are common themes in historical sources from the Malay world, and a reminder that the auditory context represents a significant aspect of the region's past. One of the most dramatic episodes in the great Malay epic, *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, describes the extraordinary paralinguistic power exercised by Hang Tuah's companion, Hang Jebat, as he reads a story to the Melaka ruler and the palace women. His recitation and singing are so mellifluous and so seductively sweet that they seem to cast a spell over all who hear him; the listening concubines and maidservants are filled with desire, while the ruler himself, lulled into slumber, falls asleep on Hang Jebat's lap. As a departure point for this essay, however, it is important to note that although his voice is delicately melodious (*merdu*) it is at the same time extremely loud (*terlalu nyaring*), marking out an auditory domain in which those within earshot are subject to his vocal charisma.<sup>2</sup>

The frequency with which indigenous sources refer to the power of human speech has interested historians of the Malay world, who cannot be accused of being deaf to the dynamics of an aural past.<sup>3</sup> However, although several studies have focused on orality in traditional Malay societies,<sup>4</sup> other sounds have received less attention. In an acoustic world that was much quieter than that which we now inhabit, listeners could detect fine details in even small sounds, while distant noises that today would be drowned out could still command attention and thus form "a significant part of the soundscape."<sup>5</sup> Studies of the aural environment of pre-modern Europe and North America have provided stimulating material that encourages colleagues working in other world areas to think in terms of alternative histories as presented by "earwitnesses."<sup>6</sup> Such studies provide a salutary reminder not merely that technology has changed the way we react to the auditory world, but that aerial noises like wind, rain and especially thunder

were once thought to emanate from intentional beings who exercised both power and purpose. Sacralised as tangible forces, these sounds were thought to "do things" in the world; more particularly, the immediacy and potential intervention of any sound increased in direct proportion to its intensity.<sup>7</sup> In urging us to "listen to the past," scholars working on aural history have stressed that the field itself is young and that "the history of listening, sound and noise outside of the United States and Europe begs for detailed attention and investigation."<sup>8</sup> This essay is an effort towards furthering that endeavour.

If historians of the pre-modern Malay world could transport themselves back into the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the spread of court literacy encouraged the writing of so many texts, they would enter a world where human action was shaped by sensory experience in a way that is now difficult to recapture. Differentiation of sounds, sight, smell, taste, and touch culturally anchored communities and helped in constructing the boundaries through which local identities were constituted. The onomatopoeia and duplication so characteristic of the Malay language—*celup-celap*, the splashing of water, *kelentang*, the clanging of a gong, *ngeh*, blowing the nose, *gegak-gempita*, an uproar—itself speaks to the interaction between speech and the auditory environment. Like other pre-modern societies, the Malays were also aurally attuned to the significance of thunder, and to the different messages that might be conveyed by a thunderous peal (*tagar*), a distant rumbling (*deram-deram*), or a sharp clap (*petir*). This sensitivity is hardly accidental, for in the core Malay cultural zone—east coast Sumatra, the Malay Peninsula, and west coast Borneo—where there are no active volcanoes, the loudest natural sound in ordinary human experience was undoubtedly thunder. Indeed, most of the early modern world, including Europeans, believed that the booming sound of thunder represented the cosmic voice of an immensely powerful supernatural agency.<sup>9</sup> The universality of this awe was nicely captured more than a hundred years ago by the German philologist Otto Schrader when writing on India: the clash of thunder, he wrote, is a natural phenomenon "which agitates most powerfully the feelings of mankind."<sup>10</sup> In Southeast Asia, linguistic evidence indicates that early Austronesian societies (including ancestors of later Malay speakers) conceived of a thunder-god capable of sending a punitive storm (*baliw*). This evidence points to the antiquity of perceptions of thunder as a judgmental force and suggests that associated taboos were intended to protect the natural and sacred orders, "and hence presumably the authority of the ancestors."<sup>11</sup>

The belief that thunder signified a cosmic presence assumed particular relevance in tropical Asia, where atmospheric conditions cause

thunderstorms to occur with a frequency and intensity that makes them particularly frightening. William Marsden (1754–1836), who spent many years in the Malay areas, thus remarked: "During the north-west monsoon the explosions [of thunderstorms] are extremely violent; the forked lightning shoots in all directions, and the whole sky seems on fire, whilst the ground is agitated in a degree little inferior to the motion of a slight earthquake."<sup>12</sup> Like many other pre-modern societies, the Malays believed that the sound of thunder exercised such physical power that it could tear down trees and smash the masts of ships. The German botanist Georg Eberhard Rumphius (1627–1702) provided a detailed description of objects "produced by thunder and tossed down," which Malays called thunder teeth or thunder stones (*gigi guntur, batu lintar*), and which were regarded as tangible proof of the presence of giant beings in the sky.<sup>13</sup> Some indication of past attitudes of Malays can be found in the Malay Peninsula and Borneo among aboriginal and tribal groups, for whom the rolling sound of thunder is a warning against violations of the social order.<sup>14</sup> One *orang asli* group, the Temiar, speak of the thunder god, Engku, whose "voice" can exercise such power that those who anger him (for instance, by imitating certain animals) can lose their head souls.<sup>15</sup> If anything, deep-seated ideas about the power of thunder as a cosmic voice were reinforced when Islam began to spread through the archipelago. In Surah 13, entitled "Thunder," the Qur'an reminded Muslims that "the thunder celebrates His praise, and the angels too for fear of Him; and He sends the thunder-clap and overtakes therewith whom He will."

## SOUNDING AUTHORITY

Because intensity of sound was a measure of the force that produced it, the manipulation of instruments and implements that could extend auditory reach was intimately connected with the evolution of leadership and status-based communities. Increasing the acoustic horizon ("the maximum distance between a sonic source and where it can be heard") meant that face-to-face contact was no longer essential for a leader to compel attention or impose obedience over followers. An increase in the number of listeners who shared the ability to listen to the same "sonic event" provided a basis for common responses that contributed to social cohesion.<sup>16</sup> Against this background the notion that all sounds had power, and that loud sounds had exceptional power, explains the preoccupation with developing instrumental soundways that could enlarge a leader's aural domain. The Malay *gendang* (drum) originated as a hollow log or bamboo, but over time the sound was

amplified by making a slit and closing the ends to create a resonating chamber. Far less common, but for that reason greatly prized, were the bronze drums scattered through Southeast Asia. The main production sites were in Vietnam, from whence the six drums found in the Malay Peninsula were probably imported.<sup>17</sup>

Whether made of metal or wood, these noise-producing instruments shared several features in common. First, they were animated by supernatural powers. Because their appearance and sound were unique, each possessed its own personality, and was accorded a name and often gendered in pairs, like the *gendang* La Tui (male) and La Ena (female) mentioned in a Malay text from the island of Bima.<sup>18</sup> Slit-drums could be carved with human or animal features, and the various parts anthropomorphised; the aperture was the mouth, its edges lips, the upper part the head and neck, the log itself the body.<sup>19</sup> Their spirits were ritually propitiated, "fed" with offerings of food, elaborately decorated and draped with ornaments, like the beads that adorned a bronze drum found on the Malay Peninsula.<sup>20</sup> Second, the womb-like associations of their hollow interior resonated with ideas of procreation, and drums were ritually beaten to call up the rains and to ensure the fertility of the land and its people. But life was also linked to death, and skeletal remains have been found in some drums; two unearthed in the Malay state of Selangor were found near a probable burial mound.<sup>21</sup> Third, since each drum was unique and possessed by no other community, the percussion that transformed "an otherwise static piece of metal [or wood] into a living organism" also spoke to a shared group identity. Though curated by the chief or village head, these ancestral instruments nonetheless remained a communal possession.<sup>22</sup> Because they were connected with a community's origins and deemed essential for its well-being, the possibility of loss was not merely "unthinkable" but culturally unbearable.<sup>23</sup> And finally, because a primary function of loud sound was to summon supernatural energies or to galvanise communal attention, the most valued drums were those that possessed the most impressive acoustic properties. The *Hikayat Hang Tuah* thus speaks of magical log of wood that made a sound "like thunder" (*gemuruh bunyinya*) when beaten. Moving beyond literary sources, this association between drumming and thunderous noise is nicely captured in an *orang asli* belief that the grandchildren of the creator of the world produce thunder by beating on a very large wooden beam.<sup>24</sup>

The *orang asli* notion that this drum-beating creator resembles a Malay raja is not inconsequential, for the organisation of manpower and the chains of command that were so essential to the functioning of early polities were conditional on the manipulation and effectiveness of sound. Something of this is conveyed by a sixth-century Chinese description of distant tribal

communities in the south: "Those [bronze] drums whose sound carries farthest are reckoned among the best, being worth a thousand heads of cattle. A man who possesses two or three drums may call himself a king. If the drums are being struck on a mountain top, all Man (tribal peoples) gather in groups."<sup>25</sup> In other words, sound established acoustic boundaries incorporating all those within earshot into a community that shared allegiance to the same authority and that was under the protective power of the spirits drumming invoked. Functioning as far more than musical instruments, these communal possessions were considered essential for group survival and well-being. Seventeenth century Balinese villagers, fleeing an attack, thus carried their two slit-drums to be installed in their new settlement, even though it would have been quite possible to carve replacements.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, a group of Banda people, escaping by boat to one of the Kei Islands—presumably to escape VOC (Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie or the Dutch East India Company) action—brought their drums with them.<sup>27</sup> In this context, it is quite possible to suggest that the 1625 Dutch destruction of a "thunder drum" (which Rumphius terms *tympanum tonitrus*) placed on top of a Banda volcano may have been a calculated attempt to eliminate an object that "reinforced the group's unity and further[ed] its continuity."<sup>28</sup>

## DRUMMING IN THE COMMUNITY: THE MALAY NOBAT

This multi-layered legacy means it is difficult for any translation to convey the cultural weight attached to the beating of drums, accounts of which recur so frequently in Malay texts. *Gendang* of varying sizes could be heard in many different contexts and served different purposes, but the most impressive was always the great drum, the core instrument of the *nobat*, the royal orchestra. The *gendang nobat* had a long association with authority. The original term *naubat* (from Arabic *nauba*), apparently reached the Malay world from the Middle East via Indian-Muslim connections. In Mughal India it referred to an orchestra using drums and other instruments such as the *nafiri* (small oboe), the *surnāī* (oboe, Malay *serunai*) and *nagārā* (kettledrum) that performed at the gateways of palaces and royal mausoleums at fixed hours of the day. Even in the 1920s a visitor to India commented on "the sunset music which through the centuries has been played only above the palace gateway of a reigning Indian prince," indicating that the *naubat* sound transported to the Malay world had a particular association with kingly authority.<sup>29</sup>

As in so many aspects of Southeast Asian life, when new musical sounds entered the regional repertoire, they became part of a process of localisation that melded incoming influences with established traditions. In the first instance, legends helped to anchor the sacral power of drums to primordial origins, and according to the Malay epic, the *Sejarah Melayu*, a legendary queen of Bintan first used the *nobat* to install the founding ruler of Melaka.<sup>30</sup> The ruling dynasty of Perak claimed descent from the Melaka line and an eighteenth-century chronicle, the *Misa Melayu*, informs its audience that the eight original *nobat* tunes came "out of the sea."<sup>31</sup> Because the Malay *nobat* was thought to have originated with the Melaka dynasty, the right to reproduce its very specific sound required the authority of legitimate transmission. The *Sejarah Melayu* thus records how the Raja of Kedah went to Melaka to pay homage and ask for a *nobat*, as did the rulers of Patani, Pahang and Indragiri in Sumatra.<sup>32</sup> Affirming his place as a "Malay" ruler, in 1766 the Bugis chief of Selangor received his *nobat* from the sultan of Perak, and in 1780 the latter agreed to install a Patani chief as sultan and to present him with "royal musical instruments."<sup>33</sup>

The potency of the sound produced by the royal drums was in part attributable to the special qualities of the body and tympanum; the heads of the Perak drums, for example, were said to be made of the skins of lice, while Kedah's "mother drum" used tiger skin on one side and goatskin on the other. Specific taboos surrounded another Kedah drum, the head of which was said to have been made of the skin from the stomach of a pregnant woman.<sup>34</sup> During court ceremonies, particular libations were necessary to "feed" the spirit immanent in the royal instruments, and a range of prohibitions prevented access to all but the most spiritually powerful musicians.<sup>35</sup> The introduction of Islam enhanced these powers, for now the passage of music into the Malay world was traced back to the Prophet Abraham, and *gendang* bearing the name Ibrahim Khalil (i.e., the prophet Abraham, the friend of God) are mentioned in texts from several Malay courts.<sup>36</sup> Kedah histories further claimed that their *nobat* predated that of Melaka, and was brought directly from Persia.<sup>37</sup> In Perak, compositions that were added to the original eight included titles such as "Nobat Subuh" and "Nobat Isya" (the drums for morning and evening prayers), while the *nobat* orchestra in Terengganu played tunes named "Iskandar Syah" or "Ibrahim Khalil."<sup>38</sup> Such drums resisted contact with a non-Muslim and one story tells of a Chinese who removed a hornet's nest from the Perak *gendang* swelled up and died because of the powers of this "terrific instrument."<sup>39</sup>

The cultural space occupied by the *nobat* in Malay courts and the reverence accorded particular instruments was inextricably connected with the production of a thunderous sound. While Europeans complained of the

"bedlam of noise" produced by the ruler's orchestra, a Patani manual for the playing of royal melodies repeatedly uses the word "gam" (meaning "a thundering noise") as a guide to musicians.<sup>40</sup> In a recurring motif, other texts are insistent that the drum, together with the accompanying *serunai* and *nafiri*, should be played so loudly that they resembled thunder.<sup>41</sup> The connection between thunderous sound and authority was most clearly exemplified during the ruler's installation. If he was not drummed in, and if the *nobat* performance was not carried out according to traditional ritual, his accession was not legitimate. In court protocol, sound could even determine the status of participants; in the Acehese court, for instance, the beating of the drum marked the division between those who had "taraf" or rank (standing on the left side of the drum) and those of lesser status (on the right side).<sup>42</sup>

Anchored by the drumbeat, the "bedlam of noise" contributed to what R. Murray Schafer has termed "soundmarks," by which he means "a community sound which is unique or possesses qualities which make it specially regarded or noticed by people in that community."<sup>43</sup> In the Malay case, this soundmark, heard when the ruler appeared in public, or during occasions such as a royal circumcision, a wedding, or a funeral, established an auditory channel between the ruler and all those within hearing range. When played with different rhythms, the beating of the royal drums could also announce the onset of the fasting month, send out a call for corvée or summon men to arms. In an environment where few rival sounds existed, the noise of the drum could carry for considerable distance or be relayed on from one village to another "from downstream (*hilir*) to upstream (*hulu*)," as a Kedah text puts it.<sup>44</sup> According to the *Hikayat Patani*, "The sound should be loud," for if the quality of "thunderous noise" was lacking it would be simply "insufficient" to accomplish its purpose.<sup>45</sup> Like the ringing of bells in European society, the sound of the ruler's drum became an auditory metaphor for the religious and social order, marking out the extent of local identity and royal authority by giving it a public hearing.<sup>46</sup> The *Sejarah Melayu* even tells us that a ruler of Pahang, abdicating in favour of his son, moves upstream "until he could no longer hear the royal drum."<sup>47</sup> In a counter example, in explicit recognition of the status of the Patani Queen, the Johor raja does not play his *nobat* when he visits Patani because, it is said, the juxtaposition of the two *nobat* would be discordant.<sup>48</sup>

Although the Malays shared many musical traditions, such localised identification was reinforced because in every place, the production of sound operated under contextually determined expectations of style and rendition. Even though the basic instruments were similar, the sounds they created were quite distinctive. Accordingly, Hang Tuah was told that the



melodies of the people of Inderapura (in Sumatra) were different from those of Malay Malacca; the *Misa Melayu* talks of music in the "Aceh" or "Kedah" style; in Patani the *nobat* performance was evidently different from that of Perak or Aceh and presumably other states as well.<sup>49</sup> Such specifics were refined even further; in the *Adat Aceh*, for instance, each stage of a royal procession was signaled by a drum rhythm that informed anyone within earshot of whether the ruler was leaving the palace, entering the mosque, or returning homewards.<sup>50</sup> Such sounds were not merely an audible expression of royal authority and status, but served as a statement of communal identity. It was therefore critical that rhythm, tempo and instrumental coordination be followed precisely, for if the sounds were somehow "incorrect" it could be a warning of some impending disaster.<sup>51</sup> In the absence of any notation, the impermanence of sound placed a heavy responsibility on those responsible for generational transmission. It was undoubtedly an awareness of the possibility of loss that led a Patani chronicler to produce a musical manual that would convey the percussive structures of various *ragam* through the onomatopoeia of drum mnemonics. In this context, it is significant that a possible translation for the first Patani *ragam* is "primordial beginnings."<sup>52</sup>

## ACOUSTIC PRE-EMINENCE: CANNON

Most written versions of Malay texts date from the fifteenth century or later, a period when gunpowder and firearms were increasingly available. Though initially adopted for military purposes, this new technology also energised the ongoing search to amplify sound as rulers sought to enhance their own status and elevate state reputation. Initially, the most impressive manifestation of innovative ballistic science was the great cannon brought to Southeast Asia from Turkey and China, the size of which—"the greatest I have ever seen"—aroused wonder from European observers. Local foundries produced their own usually smaller copies, augmented by gifts from Europeans; a large cannon presented to the Sultan of Aceh by James I (1603–1625), for instance, measured seventeen feet in length, with a circumference at the breech of over nine feet.<sup>53</sup> Although their immobility meant that cannon of this size had limited use except in siege warfare, the explosion of firing, the pungent smell of gunpowder and the clouds of smoke instilled a fear that supernatural powers might be summoned, powers for which human beings had little answer. Seeking a metaphor to describe the Portuguese attack on Melaka in 1511, the author of the *Sejarah Melayu* employs what became a formulaic comparison in Malay literature "the noise

of the cannon was like thunder in the heavens and the gunfire like flashes of lightning in the sky."<sup>54</sup> The descent of the cosmic voice from the sky and its perceived transmogrification into an immediate and terrifying presence made cannonfire highly effective against groups for whom firearms were unfamiliar, even when smaller models were used. Recording confrontations with Borneo Dayak in the eighteenth century, a Malay text thus reports that "when the Dayak hear the sound of gunfire, they think only of escape, and they flee homewards in even greater panic when they hear the noise of cannon and swivel guns."<sup>55</sup>

The Dayak reaction is a cogent reminder that in the pre-modern Malay world, the discharge of a cannon preempted all others and, as in seventeenth-century London, "asserted aural dominance over the soundscape," compelling attention from individuals and the community alike.<sup>56</sup> Because cannon had a much larger acoustic reach than drums, they were frequently preferred for ceremonial purposes, to announce some special occasion or to summon people for royal service. This was particularly true of the larger pieces, permanently situated outside the royal palace, on bulwarks or near the entrance to the main settlement. In Patani, for instance, a Dutch report from 1602 noted that a huge cannon, "bigger than any found in Amsterdam" was placed in a prominent position close to the port.<sup>57</sup> From these highly visible vantage points the explosive sound of cannon fire proclaimed the beginning and end of the fasting month, important days in the Muslim calendar and other significant events like the arrival of an envoy or the consummation of a royal wedding. In effect, the cannon acted as the ruler's voice and in Patani the sound was reportedly audible forty kilometers away, with an aural intensity that "was like an earthquake."<sup>58</sup> This extension of the ruler's auditory domain was especially useful when subjects were beyond the sound of a drumbeat; in Johor, for instance, a cannon shot might be the only means by which the scattered sea people could be rallied in times of warfare.<sup>59</sup>

Although some aspects of their auditory messages are lost, historical sources offer some understanding of the cultural environment in which the most prestigious cannons were positioned. Like drums, they were imbued with their own personality, a personality shaped by the requirements for specific measures of gunpowder that could be dispensed only by skilled canoniers well acquainted with individual needs and idiosyncrasies. While cannon shot is far less distinctive than drum rhythms, there were still ways to assert local identity. A young British midshipman, describing a Muslim celebration in a Malay community in east Sumatra, thus remarked on the way in which the cannon were fired in sequence, a method that he considered quite novel.<sup>60</sup> Locally-made cannon were decorated, often

elaborately, with floral and geometric designs, while European drums bore mantra-like dates and foreign writing registering the city of provenance or the letters VOC. Their animation by supernatural powers was confirmed by titles such as "Si Jimat" (Lord Talisman), "Dragon of the Waves," "Pride of Java" or "Anak Makassar" (son of Makassar) that tied them to legendary individuals, awe-inducing animals and prestigious locations.<sup>61</sup> Legends of Islamic origins could provide formidable genealogies, and a nineteenth-century manuscript from the Sumatran state of Jambi notes that after the Muslim founder had mediated for a week, two [Muslim] *jinn* gave him a supernaturally-charged cannon.<sup>62</sup> Such genealogies were further enhanced by their travels from distant places, particularly from the courts of prestigious Muslim kings. A number of Aceh's cannon, for example, came from Ottoman Turkey and the largest of three thousand cannon captured by the Portuguese when they attacked Melaka had been presented by the king of Calicut.<sup>63</sup> The peregrinations of renowned cannon further enhanced their reputation. Seri Rambai, originally a VOC cannon cast in 1603, was originally given to Johor by the Dutch, but was then captured by the Acehnese. In the late eighteenth century it was given to Selangor in return for military assistance only to be seized by the British in 1871. Initially thrown overboard, it was hauled up in 1880 and placed on display in Penang.<sup>64</sup>

Like other powerful beings, cannon required ritual propitiation if they were to support human endeavours.<sup>65</sup> One could even argue that their anthropomorphic metamorphosis into powerful and protective patrons with names such as "Sri Negeri" ("sacred country") became doubly significant because of Muslim prohibitions against the representation of the human figure. Inscriptions like those invoked on Aceh's cannon referred to Sultan Iskandar Muda (1590–1636) as "King of the World, blessed by Allah" and recoded Qur'anic verses such as "Help from Allah and a victory near at hand; and give good tidings to the believers."<sup>66</sup> When Dutch East India Company forces attacked Palembang in 1659, local Muslim authorities sprinkled incense over two great cannon draped with red cloth that were placed outside the main walls, while offering prayers to invoke supernatural insistence.<sup>67</sup> In a similar vein, the *Hikayat Patani* records the achievements of Nang (Lady) Liu-Liu, who protected the ruler's brother as his boat fled from the Siamese. Promised great rewards if she assisted him to escape, Nang Liu-Liu fired shots that sank many of the Siamese vessels and frightened off the remainder. On returning to Patani she was celebrated like royalty, while the royal drums were beaten for her alone for three days and nights.<sup>68</sup>

Though the almost invariable comparison of cannon fire to the clash of thunder might seem merely formulaic, its totalising sound simultaneously linked ideas of judgment and retribution that could both punish and reward. At the same time, hearing operated in combination with the other senses, especially sight, and thunder was always associated with the visuality of clouds and their promise of life-giving rain. In this conjunction of aural and visual, the cylindrical shape of even old and rusting cannon located them in a cultural arena where all phallic-style objects were emblematic of procreation and generative powers, like the sacred *linga* of earlier times. If the spirits who animated these venerated objects were appropriately propitiated they would ensure that the rains came in time, that the harvests flourished, that the community would be spared disaster and that enemies would be repelled. If anything, the fecundity inherent in what Europeans dismissed as non-functioning ordnance of no military value became greater with the passing of time, precisely because they no longer threatened life. Still, in the twentieth century it was thought that a barren woman would conceive if suitable offerings were made to Penang's famed cannon, *Seri Rambai*.<sup>69</sup>

The case of *Seri Rambai* is illustrative because of the widespread belief that Selangor could never return to its former greatness as long as this pillaged cannon remained in Penang.<sup>70</sup> Throughout the Malay world, there is repeated evidence of the conviction that the destinies of such sacralised state "objects" so deeply implicated in the community's history were essential for its well-being. The firing of a cannon, signaling a royal circumcision, or the installation of a ruler, or the end of the fasting month, was also a "speech act" that reaffirmed its protective presence. The psychological and cultural trauma induced by the loss of any of these communal palladium is particularly evident in Patani. Seized by the Siamese in 1785, the great cannon that bears the inscription *Phya Tani* (Lord Patani, originally *Seri Patani* in Malay), is still standing outside the Ministry of Defense in Bangkok. But its capture represented far more than a reduction in firepower or the humiliation of defeat. A Patani author puts the matter simply: of all the items that were looted by the Siamese, he writes, "the most valued was the great cannon made in the reign of Raja Biru of former times."<sup>71</sup>

As we "hear" the unfolding of Malay history, the capture of these larger cannon, a standard practice in Malay warfare, assumes a deeper significance that is usually overlooked. For the Europeans who arrived in the Malay world, noise was already being linked with lower classes, and quietness was a desired attribute exemplified by those of education and standing.<sup>72</sup> In the Malay world, however, noise was associated with authority and the capacity to command obedience; in this line of thinking,

the more closely a sound resembled thunder, the more powerful were the forces it contained, like the sounds of warfare between the gods.<sup>73</sup> The playing of the royal orchestra, the beating of the great drum, the roll of cannon fire, worked together to define an acoustic arena by exaggerating and elaborating the auditory field. The constant search to extend the aural channel that linked ruler to subject and to widen the aural arena that provided a basis for social cohesion made the melding of gunfire and drumming a natural development. In royal processions or on state occasions, the firing of guns and cannon was accordingly combined with gongs, drums and trumpets to produce the tumultuous *gegak-gempita* (hubbub, uproar) so beloved of Malay chroniclers. In the process another soundmark was produced, a combination of booming, beating, banging, blowing and clanging that reached a thunderous force and concentration which one text succinctly identifies as "a sign of greatness" (*tanda kebesaran*).<sup>74</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Nearly a century ago, the French historian Lucien Febvre forcefully argued that in the past, the sensory experience shaped human lives to a greater extent than is now the case.<sup>75</sup> In recent years, a number of scholars have responded to the call for greater attention to the "sensory dimensions of history," and a succession of studies of European and northern America have illuminated the ways people in the past saw, heard, smelled, tasted and touched.<sup>76</sup> The emergence of this new field of sensory history is an exciting development for historians of non-Western cultures because it encourages a return to well-known sources with fresh questions that can often yield unexpected but illuminating responses. This essay began with the premise that in the traditional Malay world, as in other pre-modern societies, both natural and man-made sounds were heard differently from the way we hear them today. In exploring the relationship between sound, power, territorial dominion and community identity, I have concentrated on the sonic agency of royal drums and cannon and the "metaphors, analogies and similes" by which their sounds were described in Malay texts.<sup>77</sup> Privileging aural comparisons rather than visual, these literary devices were not invented in a vacuum; rather, as in early America, they were intimately related to an acoustic environment in which the awe-inspiring roll of thunder—the voice of the heavens—established the benchmark by which human replication could seek to claim an earthly authority. Malay villagers working in their rice fields or bathing in the river or saying their prayers or walking to the market may have been physically distanced from the raja, the palace, the

imam and the mosque. Nonetheless, the distant beating of the royal drums and the booming of the royal cannon was both a reminder of their subordination to the temporal power of the ruler and a reassurance that they themselves were protected by the supernatural powers such sounds invoked. Individually, and in combination, these noise-producing "objects" personified the overlap between auditory field and communal identity. Fused with intense associations of fertility, the sounds they emitted were part of an interactive acoustical space, conveying messages that helped to define a community's cultural parameters and affirm the place of the ruler at its emotional core. From this perspective, the call to "hear" Malay history thus provokes exciting possibilities for new approaches to the past through an exploration of the multiple aural contexts in which "indigenous voices" were articulated.

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this article was presented as a Public Lecture for the Asia-Pacific Research Unit at the Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia, 11 July, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Kassim Ahmad, ed. *Hikayat Hang Tuah* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa, 1971), 291–292; Henk Maier, *We Are Playing Relatives: A Survey of Malay Writing* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2004), 35. I would like to acknowledge the invaluable access to Malay texts offered by the Malay Concordance Project, developed under the leadership of Dr. Ian Proudfoot of the Australian National University. I could not have embarked on the present paper without this wonderful resource.

<sup>3</sup> As, according to Mark Smith in an article published in 2000, were scholars working on Europe and America. Mark M. Smith, "Listening to the Heard Worlds of Antebellum America," reprinted in Mark M. Smith, ed. *Hearing History: A Reader* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 365.

<sup>4</sup> Shelly Errington, "Some Comments on Style in the Meanings of the Past," *Journal of Asian Studies* 38, no. 2 (February 1979): 231–244; Amin Sweeney, *A Full Hearing. Orality and Literacy in the Malay World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Will Derks, *The Feast of Storytelling: On Malay Oral Tradition* (Jakarta/Leiden: RUL, 1994); Vladimir Braginsky, "Meaning of the Sound: Magic and Sufi Mysticism in the Phonic Structure of the Malay Charm and Chant," *Indonesia and the Malay World* 34, no. 100 (2006): 281–314.

<sup>5</sup> Barry Truax, *Acoustic Communication*, 2nd ed. (Westport, CT: Ablex Publishing, 2001), 79.

<sup>6</sup> For a recent overview, see Mark M. Smith, *Sensing the Past: Seeing, Hearing Smelling, Tasting and Touching in History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> Richard Cullen Rath, *How Early America Sounded* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003), 11, 56; Alain Corbin, *Village Bells: Sound and Meaning in the 19th Century French Countryside*, trans. Martin Thom (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 97.

<sup>8</sup> Mark M. Smith, ed., "Introduction: Onward to Audible Pasts," in *Hearing History*, x.

<sup>9</sup> Rath, *How Early America Sounded*, 20–41.

<sup>10</sup> Otto Schrader, "Aryan Religion," in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1910–1927), II: 33.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Blust, "Linguistic Evidence for Some Early Austronesian Taboos," *American Anthropologist* 83, no. 2 (June 1981): 308.

<sup>12</sup> William Marsden, *A History of Sumatra*, 3rd ed. (London; Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown, 1811), 18.

<sup>13</sup> C. M. Pleyte Wzn, "De praehistorische steenen weapenen en werktuigen uit den Oost Indischen Archipel, beschowd uit een archaeologisch and ethnographisch oogpunt," *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde van Nederlandsch-Indië* 36, no. 1 (1887): 586–604; E. M. Beekman, trans. and ed., *The Ambonese Curiosity Cabinet* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 240–250.

<sup>14</sup> Ivor Evans, *Negritos of Malaya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1937) 144, 170 ff, 174; Derek Freeman, "Thunder, Blood and the Nicknaming of God's Creatures," *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (1968): 353.

- <sup>15</sup> Marina Roseman, *Healing Sounds from the Malaysian Rainforest: Temiar Music and Medicine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 27, 137.
- <sup>16</sup> Barry Blesser and Linda-Ruth Salter, *Spaces Speak, Are You Listening? Experiencing Aural Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 22; Rath, *How Early America Sounded*, 46–48.
- <sup>17</sup> Peter Bellwood, *Prehistory of the Indo-Malaysian Archipelago*, revised ed. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997), 277–278.
- <sup>18</sup> Henri Chambert-Loir and Siti Maryam R. Salahuddin, *Bo' Sangaji Kai: Catatan Kerajaan Bima*, (Jakarta: École française d'Extrême-Orient / Yayasan Obor Indonesia, 1999. *Naskah dan Dokumen Nusantara, XVIII*), 384.
- <sup>19</sup> D. H. Meyer, "De Spleetrom," *Tijdschrift voor Indische Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 79 (1939): 423.
- <sup>20</sup> A. J. Bernet Kempers, *The Kettledrums of Southeast Asia: A Bronze Age World and its Aftermath. Modern Quaternary Research in Southeast Asia*, vol. 10 (Rotterdam: A. A. Balkema, 1988) 69, 71.
- <sup>21</sup> Bellwood, *Prehistory of the Indo-Malaysian Archipelago*, 278, 292.
- <sup>22</sup> Bernet Kempers, *The Kettledrums of Southeast Asia*, 65, 71.
- <sup>23</sup> Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 80.
- <sup>24</sup> Ahmad, *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, 335; Evans, *Negritos*, 155, 180.
- <sup>25</sup> Cited in Bernet Kempers, *The Kettledrums of Southeast Asia*, 391.
- <sup>26</sup> Meyer, "De Spleetrom," 418.
- <sup>27</sup> Bernet Kempers, *The Kettledrums of Southeast Asia*, 79.
- <sup>28</sup> Bernet Kempers, *The Kettledrums of Southeast Asia*, 391; Hendrik Theodorus Chabot, *Verwantschap, stand en sexe in Zuid-Celebes* (Groningen: J. B. Wolters, 1950), 77.
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- <sup>30</sup> C. C. Brown, "Sejarah Melayu or 'Malay Annals,'" *Journal of the Malaysian Branch, Royal Asiatic Society* 25, no. 2 and 3 (1952): 18–20.
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- <sup>32</sup> Brown, *Sejarah Melayu*, 137, 152, 175, 187–188.
- <sup>33</sup> Raja Chulan, *Misa Melayu*, 188; Barbara Watson Andaya, *Perak, the Abode of Grace: A Study of an Eighteenth Century Malay State* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1975), 269, 270–271 278, 340–341.
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- <sup>35</sup> R. O. Winstedt, *The Malay Magician, being Shaman, Saiva and Sufi* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951), 69; Noraini, "Nobat dalam Adat-Istiadat Diraja Kedah," 145.
- <sup>36</sup> Noraini, "Nobat dalam Adat-Istiadat Diraja Kedah," 135; Takeshi Ito, "The World of the Adat Aceh: A Historical Study of the Sultanate of Aceh" (unpublished thesis, Australian National University, 1984): 219; Amirul Hadi, *Islam and State in Sumatra: A Study of Seventeenth-Century Aceh* (Brill: Leiden and Boston, 2004), 126–137; Panuti H. M. Sudjiman, ed., *Adat Raja-Raja Melayu* (Jakarta: Penerbit Universitas Indonesia, 1983), 74; Hill, "Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai," 119.
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- <sup>38</sup> Raja Chulan, *Misa Melayu*, 194; Teeuw and Wyatt, *Hikayat Patani*, 41, 92; Muhammad Yusoff Hashim, ed., *Terengganu Darul Iman: Tradisi Persejarahannya Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1991), 682, 792; In Malay legend Alexander the Great (Iskandar Syah) is considered a great Muslim.
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- <sup>41</sup> For example, A. H. Hill, "Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch, Royal Asiatic Society* 33, no. 2 (1960): 82, 142; Raja Ali Haji, *Salasilah Bugis*, ed. Mohd. Yusof Md. Nor (Kuala Lumpur: Fajar Bakti, 1984), 93, 182.
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- <sup>45</sup> A. Teeuw and D. K. Wyatt, *Hikayat Patani* (The Hague, 1970), 145, 216.
- <sup>46</sup> Rath, *How Early America Sounded*, 51; see further Corbin, *Village Bells*.
- <sup>47</sup> Brown, *Sejarah Melayu*, 151.
- <sup>48</sup> Teeuw and Wyatt, *Hikayat Patani*, 109, 181.
- <sup>49</sup> Raja Chulan, *Misa Melayu*, 84; Kasim, *Hang Tuah*, 175; Teeuw and Wyatt, *Hikayat Patani*, 287.
- <sup>50</sup> Ramli Harun and Tjut Rahma M. A. Gani, ed., *Adat Aceh* (Jakarta: Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, Proyek Penerbitan Buku Sastra Indonesia dan Daerah, 1985); 37; Ito, "The World of the *Adat Aceh*," 218, 269n82.
- <sup>51</sup> See, for example, the situations in J. J. Ras, *Hikayat Bandjar: A Study in Malay Historiography* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1968), 389, 396.
- <sup>52</sup> Teeuw and Wyatt, *Hikayat Patani*, 123, 141, 193, 211.
- <sup>53</sup> Anne Bulley, *Free Mariner: John Adolphus Pope in the East Indies, 1786–1821* (London: British Association for Cemeteries in South Asia, 1992), 64. See further Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce 1450–1680, vol. 2: Expansion and Crisis* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 220–227; Leonard Y. Andaya, "Interactions with the Outside World and Adaptations in Southeast Asian Society, 1500–1800," in *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*, ed. Nicholas Tarling (University of Cambridge Press: Sydney, 1992), 345–339.
- <sup>54</sup> Brown, *Sejarah Melayu*, 167.
- <sup>55</sup> Raja Ali Haji, *Salasilah Melayu dan Bugis*, ed. Mohd. Yusof Md. Nor (Kuala Lumpur: Fajar Bakti, 1984), 220–221.
- <sup>56</sup> Bruce R. Smith, "The Soundscapes of Early Modern England," in *Hearing History*, ed. Mark Smith, 94.
- <sup>57</sup> J. W. Ijzerman, "Hollandsche Prenten al Handelsartikel te Patani in 1602," *Koninklijk Instituut voor de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde van Nederlandsch-Indië. Gedenkschrift uitgegeven ter gelegenheid van het 75-jarig bestaan op 4 Juni 1926* (The Hague: Koninklijk Instituut, 1926), 88.
- <sup>58</sup> Pierre Le Roux, "Bedé kaba' ou les derniers canons de Patani," *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient* 85, no. 1 (1998): 133, 155.
- <sup>59</sup> Raja Ali Haji, *Salasilah Melayu dan Bugis*, 156; C. Skinner, ed., *The Battle for Junk Ceylon: The Syair Sultan Maulana. Text, Translation and Notes* (Dordrecht: Foris, for the Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde, 1985), 208–209.
- <sup>60</sup> Bulley, *Free Mariner*, 111.
- <sup>61</sup> For the names of ship's cannon, see Skinner, *The Battle for Junk Ceylon*, 76–81.
- <sup>62</sup> Sergei Kukushkin, "Hikayat Negeri Jambi: The Structure and Sources of a Nineteenth-century Malay Historical Work," *Indonesia and the Malay World* 32, no. 92 (2004): 55.
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- <sup>65</sup> J. F. Scheltema, *Monumental Java* (1812; repr., New Delhi: Asian Education Services, 1996), 10–12 provides a contemporary description of the devotion offered sacred cannon in Java.
- <sup>66</sup> K. C. Cruq, "Beschrijving der kanonnen afkomstig uit Atjeh, thans in het Koninklijk Kolonial Militair Invalidenhuis Bronbeek," *Tijdschrift voor Indische Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 81 (9141): 548.



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- <sup>68</sup> Teeuw and Wyatt, *Hikayat Patani*, 82–87, 158–162.
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- <sup>70</sup> Douglas, "The Penang Cannon Si Rambai," 118.
- <sup>71</sup> Ibrahim Syukri, *Sejarah Kerajaan Melayu Patani* [History of the Malay Kingdom of Patani] (Bangi: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2002), 74; Le Roux, "Bedé kaba' ou les derniers canons de Patani," 138.
- <sup>72</sup> Smith, *Sensing the Past*, 45.
- <sup>73</sup> For example, Achadiati, *Hikayat Seri Rama*, 236, 636.
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- <sup>75</sup> Lucien Febvre, *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century: The Religion of Rabelais*, trans. Beatrice Gottlieb (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 11–12, 423–442.
- <sup>76</sup> Mark M. Smith, "Still Coming to 'Our' Senses: An Introduction," *The Journal of American History* 95, no. 2 (September, 2008): 379–380.
- <sup>77</sup> Mark Smith, "Listening to the Heard Worlds," 365–366; Rath, *How Early America Sounded*, 19–23, 32, 40.