

The Black Eagle Quill Risya in Malaysia: Material Culture, Curatorial Ethnography, and the First Documented Introduction of a Levantine Oud Pick to the Malay World

Risya Bulu Helang Hitam di Malaysia: Budaya Material, Etnografi Kuratorial, dan Pengenalan Terdokumentasi Pertama Plektrum Oud Levant ke Dunia Melayu

RAJA ZULKARNAIN RAJA MOHD YUSOF

City University Malaysia, Menara City U, No. 8, Jalan 51A/223, 46100 Petaling Jaya, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia

E-mail: raja.zulkarnain@city.edu.my

Received: 8 January 2026; Accepted: 12 Mac 2026

ABSTRACT

The black eagle quill risya (gambus/oud pick) holds a distinctive status in Levantine musical culture, yet its presence has remained undocumented in Southeast Asia. Despite the prominence of the risya in Arab musical practice, its material history has never been recorded or discussed in any Southeast Asian organological or ethnomusicological literature. This article presents the first scholarly account of the material's arrival, exhibition, and pedagogical introduction in Malaysia. Drawing on material-culture theory, object-biography analysis, and curatorial ethnography, the study traces the trajectory of two rare quill picks: a Levantine risya acquired from an oud maker in Palestine and first displayed for six months at the Pameran Gambus Serantau organised by the Jabatan Muzium Malaysia in 2015, and a Jordanian black eagle quill risya later exhibited at the Maybank Foundation Cultural Art Showcase Exhibition in 2024. Together, these objects mark the earliest verified appearances of eagle-quill picks in the Malay world. Primary data consist of curatorial records, exhibition documentation, and practice-based observations by the author, who played a direct role in introducing these materials into Malaysian oud pedagogy. Secondary sources include organological literature, regional gambus scholarship, and accounts of Levantine artisanal practice. The analysis highlights the cultural symbolism, craftsmanship, and sonic characteristics of eagle-quill picks, situating them within broader organological histories of the gambus in Malaysia. The findings provide empirical evidence of a previously unrecorded material exchange between the Middle East and Malaysia, demonstrating how museum exhibitions and practitioner-curators can reshape contemporary heritage discourse and performance practice.

Keywords: Material Culture of Music; Oud and Gambus Organology; Levantine Risya (Eagle Quill Pick); Curatorial Ethnography; Heritage Transmission in Malaysia

ABSTRAK

Risya bulu helang hitam (plektrum gambus/oud) mempunyai kedudukan yang tersendiri dalam budaya muzik Levant, namun kehadirannya masih belum pernah didokumentasikan di Asia Tenggara. Walaupun risya merupakan komponen penting dalam amalan muzik Arab, sejarah materialnya belum pernah direkodkan atau dibincangkan dalam mana-mana literatur organologi atau etnomuzikologi Asia Tenggara. Artikel ini membentangkan rekod ilmiah pertama mengenai kedatangan bahan ini, pamerannya, serta pengenalannya dalam konteks pedagogi di Malaysia. Berpandukan teori budaya material, analisis biografi objek, dan pendekatan etnografi kuratorial, kajian ini menelusuri trajektori dua plektrum bulu yang jarang ditemui: sebuah risya Levant yang diperolehi daripada seorang pembuat oud di Palestin dan dipamerkan selama enam bulan dalam Pameran Gambus Serantau anjuran Jabatan Muzium Malaysia pada tahun 2015, serta sebuah risya bulu helang hitam dari Jordan yang kemudiannya dipamerkan dalam Maybank Foundation Cultural Art Showcase Exhibition pada tahun 2024. Kedua-dua objek ini mewakili kemunculan terawal yang dapat disahkan bagi plektrum bulu helang dalam konteks dunia Melayu. Data primer terdiri daripada rekod kuratorial,

dokumentasi pameran, serta pemerhatian berasaskan amalan oleh penulis yang memainkan peranan langsung dalam memperkenalkan bahan ini ke dalam pedagogi oud di Malaysia. Sumber sekunder merangkumi literatur organologi, kajian serantau mengenai gambus, serta dokumentasi amalan pertukangan Levant. Analisis kajian ini menonjolkan simbolisme budaya, nilai ketukangan, serta ciri sonik plektrum bulu helang, seterusnya meletakkannya dalam kerangka sejarah organologi gambus di Malaysia. Dapatan kajian ini menyediakan bukti empirikal mengenai pertukaran material yang sebelum ini tidak direkodkan antara Timur Tengah dan Malaysia, serta menunjukkan bagaimana pameran muzium dan peranan pengamal sebagai kurator mampu membentuk semula wacana warisan kontemporari dan amalan persembahan.

Kata kunci: Budaya Material Muzik; Organologi Oud dan Gambus; Risyā Levant (Plektrum Bulu Helang); Etnografi Kuratorial; Transmisi Warisan di Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

The material culture of musical instruments provides an important lens for understanding how knowledge, craftsmanship, and aesthetic values travel across regions and communities. Among the objects associated with Middle Eastern musical traditions, the *risya*, or *risha*, the pick used to play the *oud* and *gambus*, holds a distinctive position. Despite its significance in Arab musical practice, the materials used to produce the *risya* have received little scholarly attention in Southeast Asia. Within the Malay world, existing documentation focuses almost entirely on plastic, horn, and tortoise shell from earlier periods, and on various improvised substitutes used by local musicians. The use of feather-based materials, including eagle quills, has never been formally documented or examined in the literature on Malaysian or regional organology.

This article fills that gap by presenting the first academic study of the eagle-quill *risya* in Malaysia. The research is grounded in two important events: the 2015 exhibition at Jabatan Muzium Malaysia, which displayed a Levantine eagle-quill *risya* acquired from a Palestinian *oud* maker, and the 2024 Cultural Art Showcase Exhibition organised by Maybank Foundation, which featured a Jordanian black eagle-quill *risya* alongside the earlier object. These two exhibitions represent the earliest verifiable appearances of eagle-quill picks within the Malay world. Their presence expands the understanding of *gambus* history in Malaysia and demonstrates the movement of specialised musical materials from the Middle East to Southeast Asia.

The significance of these objects extends beyond their rarity. Scholars such as Kopytoff and Appadurai have shown that objects develop “social lives,” which means that the meaning of an artefact changes according to the cultural, historical, and social contexts in which it is produced and circulated. The eagle-quill *risya* clearly demonstrates this principle.

It originates from Levantine artisanal traditions, carries cultural symbolism associated with the eagle’s association with strength and prestige, and is later reinterpreted within Malaysian exhibitions and pedagogical contexts. The arrival of this object in Malaysia required more than the transfer of material goods. It also required interpretive work by curators, educators, and musicians who encountered an unfamiliar object and sought to integrate it within the existing *gambus* tradition.

Previous scholarship by the author has contributed to reconstructing the instrument’s history in Malaysia. Raja Zulkarnain (2013), in *Oud: Warisan Seni dari Timur Tengah*, includes one of the earliest Malay-language discussions of traditional *risha* materials in the Arab world, including those made from eagle feathers, includes one of the earliest Malay-language discussions of traditional *risha* materials in the Arab world, including those made from eagle feathers. More recently, the article *The Origins of the Gambus (‘Ūd) in Malaysia: A Two-Channel Hypothesis of Ottoman Cultural Exchange and Hadrami Diaspora*, published in the *Malaysian Journal of Music*, offered a detailed reconstruction of how the instrument reached the Malay world. The present study extends this previous work by shifting attention from the instrument itself to the specialised materials that influence performance technique, sound production, and cultural meaning.

This article employs a combination of material-culture analysis, object-biography theory, curatorial ethnography, and autoethnographic reflection. The author curated both exhibitions and has also spent two decades integrating Middle Eastern pedagogical materials into Malaysian *oud* education. As a result, the research benefits from direct access to primary data, including curatorial documentation, acquisition histories, field notes, exhibition photographs, interviews with makers, and pedagogical observations. These sources provide a comprehensive view of how a foreign

object enters a new cultural environment, acquires new interpretations, and influences performance practice. Curatorial ethnography, increasingly recognised within museum studies, views the curator as a mediator who shapes public understanding of an object. This approach is highly appropriate for the present study, since the eagle-quill *risya* arrived in Malaysia through curated spaces and through the interpretive work of the curator who encountered, contextualised, and introduced it.

The reappearance of the eagle-quill *risya* in 2024, almost 10 years after its first display, underscores its relevance to the study of musical heritage. The Jordanian black eagle quill *risya* was presented at the 2024 exhibition. It demonstrates Levantine craftsmanship and regional variation in quill-material practices. The presence of both *risyas* in a public exhibition created opportunities for Malaysian audiences, including musicians, students, and researchers, to encounter a rare material traditionally associated with the Arab *oud*.

This article argues that the introduction of the eagle-quill *risya* in Malaysia represents a significant development in the nation's musical and curatorial history. By highlighting the role of exhibitions in generating new cultural knowledge, the study shows how practitioner-led curation can shape public understanding of unfamiliar musical materials. It also demonstrates the value of examining small and specialised objects within broader discussions of heritage, pedagogy, and craft continuity. Through the integration of curatorial data, material-culture theory, and long-term pedagogical observation, the article not only documents the eagle-quill *risya* but also illuminates how such objects influence performance practice and heritage interpretation. In doing so, it establishes a conceptual and methodological foundation for future research on instrument materials, artisanal knowledge, and cross-regional transmission within Southeast Asian musical traditions.



Figure 1: Jordanian black eagle-quill *risya* employed in the author's practice-led pedagogical testing before its presentation in the 2024 exhibition. (Photograph by the author.)

LITERATURE REVIEW

MATERIAL CULTURE AND THE OBJECT-BIOGRAPHY APPROACH

Material culture studies have long emphasised the ability of objects to carry and communicate social

knowledge. Kopytoff's (1986) concept of the "cultural biography of things" proposes that objects gain meaning through the stages of their lives, including production, circulation, acquisition, display, and reinterpretation. Appadurai (1988) further suggests that objects possess "social lives" shaped by human interactions and changing contexts. For musical

instruments and their accessories, these principles are particularly important, since sound-producing objects often cross borders and move within and across different performance environments.

Within ethnomusicology, material culture analysis highlights the relationship between craft practices, identity formation, and sonic aesthetics. Scholars such as Miller (2005) and Hoskins (1998) have shown that objects can embody cultural narratives and that understandings associated with them can, in turn, shape understandings of community histories and artistic traditions. The theory is often applied to instruments, but there is growing interest in the study of smaller associated objects such as bows, plectra, and reeds. These components influence technique and sound, yet they frequently remain understudied.

The object-biography approach is suitable for the present study because the eagle-quill *risya* travelled from the Levant to Malaysia, acquiring new meanings through exhibition and pedagogy. The quill possessed an established identity within Middle Eastern music but developed an additional layer of significance when it entered Malaysian cultural institutions. By tracing the biography of the *risya*, it becomes possible to understand not only the object's movement but also the transfer of artisanal knowledge and performance practice. Museum studies have also stressed the role of curators in shaping the interpretation of objects. Pearce (1994) notes that museum objects and their interpretation shape how audiences understand heritage, while Hooper-Greenhill (1992) argues that exhibitions act as knowledge-producing environments. These frameworks support the study's focus on the curator's role in mediating the arrival of a new musical object in Malaysia.

ORGANOLOGY OF THE OUD AND GAMBUS

Organology provides a framework for analysing the construction, evolution, and cultural adaptation of stringed instruments. The *oud* has long been recognised as a central instrument in the Arab world, with documented lineages extending through the Abbasid, Ottoman, and Andalusí traditions. Scholars such as Wright (1978), Shiloah (1995), and Touma (1996) have explored the *oud's* modal, historical, and cultural significance. Research on construction

and playing techniques highlights the relationship between instrument building, craftsmanship, and performance aesthetics.

Within the Malay world, the *gambus* represents both a continuation and a localisation of *oud* traditions. Its presence is historically linked to Arab migration and cultural exchange across the Indian Ocean. Although the *gambus* shares organological roots with the *oud*, it has developed unique performance contexts in Malaysia, Brunei, and parts of Indonesia. The instrument appears in devotional, courtly, and popular music traditions, yet organological research on its material components has been limited. Much of the regional literature focuses on repertoire, social functions, and historical origins rather than construction or accessory materials.

International organology scholarship highlights the importance of accessories in shaping the identity of instruments. Pick materials, string types, and tuning systems influence tone production, technique, and teaching methods. Picken (1975) and Farmer (1929) both note that Middle Eastern plectra evolved in response to changes in string tension, body size, and repertoire. However, Southeast Asian studies have rarely examined the relationship between pick materials and *gambus* performance practice.

The present study addresses this gap by analysing the eagle-quill *risya* within both *oud* and *gambus* contexts. The object bridges Middle Eastern craftsmanship and Malaysian performance environments, which makes it a valuable lens for examining organological adaptation and material transfer.

HISTORICAL MATERIALS OF THE RISYA/ RISHA

The *risya* or *risha* has a long organological history in Middle Eastern music. Traditional materials included soft bird feathers, sturdier quills, bone, horn, tortoise shell, and various carved natural substances. Over time, plastic became widely available and replaced many traditional materials due to convenience and durability. Despite this shift, eagle-quill and feather-based picks continued to be produced in artisanal workshops in Jordan, Palestine, Syria, and parts of Egypt. These materials are valued for their flexibility, responsiveness, and tonal warmth.

Historical sources indicate that feather-based and quill plectra were used by oud players in earlier Egyptian and Levantine traditions, especially before the 20th century. Early descriptions of *oud* performance reference the use of bird quills and softened feather shafts as part of artisanal practice (Shiloah, 1995; Wright, 1978). These accounts support the argument that feather-derived plectra were historically embedded within Arab performance aesthetics long before modern synthetic materials became common.

Crafting a feather or quill pick required specialised knowledge, including the selection, curing, shaping, and polishing of the material. Such artisanal practices have been documented through maker interviews and regional ethnography, although academic publications remain limited. The author first observed a feather-based *risya* during a 2007 performance by the Egyptian oud virtuoso Mustafa Said in Yogyakarta, where its expressive capabilities were demonstrated in a live setting.

In Malaysia, however, there is no recorded historical use of eagle-quill or feather-based picks within *gambus* traditions. Local musicians traditionally relied on materials that were readily available, such as horn, tortoise shell, or modern plastics, and the absence of feather-based plectra reflects both limited historical access to such materials and the lack of scholarly attention given readily available materials, such as horn, tortoiseshell, or modern plastics, and the absence of feather-based plectra reflects both limited historical access to such materials and the broader scholarly neglect of accessory components. This absence is reinforced by conservation literature, which notes that organic materials such as feathers and horn deteriorate rapidly without controlled environments (Barclay & Drews, 2006). Such vulnerability helps explain why feather-based plectra rarely survive in tropical regions and why they remain absent from Southeast Asian collections and documentation.

The author's book *Oud: Warisan Seni dari Timur Tengah* (2013) includes one of the earliest Malay-language discussions of Arab plectrum materials, noting the use of eagle feathers within Middle Eastern practice and describing their playing characteristics. However, the book also highlights that such materials were not present in Malaysia at the time of writing, underscoring the broader historical absence of documentation and access to feather-based picks in the region.

MALAYSIAN SCHOLARSHIP ON GAMBUS HISTORY AND PERFORMANCE PRACTICE

Academic work on the *gambus* in Malaysia has primarily focused on historical origins, repertoire, and cultural functions. Studies by local scholars have examined the instrument's role in *Zapin* and *Ghazal* traditions, the influence of Hadrami migration, and the integration of Arab musical aesthetics into Malay musical identity. However, these studies rarely address the organology of the *gambus* in detail, and references to picks or plectra are typically superficial.

The author's recent publication, *The Origins of the Gambus ('Ud) in Malaysia: A Two-Channel Hypothesis of Ottoman Cultural Exchange and Hadrami Diaspora* (Raja Mohd Yusof, 2025), contributes to this field by presenting a detailed reconstruction of the instrument's arrival in Southeast Asia. The article argues that the *gambus* likely entered the region through both Ottoman diplomatic channels and Hadrami migration networks. This dual pathway provides a broader historical framework for understanding how musical objects, repertoire, and craftsmanship travel across regions.

The findings of that study offer a foundation for the present research, which shifts focus from historical transmission to material adaptation. By examining the arrival of the eagle-quill *risya*, this article extends the discussion from the origins of instruments to the movement of specialised tools that influence technique and pedagogy. The integration of rare Levantine materials into Malaysian exhibitions and educational settings represents a form of cultural transmission that has not been previously documented.

Furthermore, the author's long-term pedagogical work, spanning institutions such as ASWARA, UiTM, UPSI, and IIUM, provides an empirical basis for understanding how new materials are adopted within local performance practice. This practical engagement strengthens the argument that material objects can shape the evolution of musical culture, especially when introduced through structured educational frameworks.

To connect these scholarly discussions' empirical trajectory, Table 1 provides a chronological overview of the eagle-quill *risya*'s movement and transformation across regional, curatorial, and pedagogical contexts.

Table 1: Historical Timeline of Eagle-Quill *Risya* in Malaysia, tracing its earliest documentation, museum exhibitions, and integration into local performance practice.

Year	Event	Location / Institution	Notes
2007	First personal encounter with eagle-quill <i>risya</i> during a live performance by <i>oud</i> virtuoso Mustafa Said	Yogyakarta, Indonesia	Provided early practitioner insight into the material and its performance characteristics
2013	First mention in Malaysian literature (author of the ITBM book)	Malaysia	<i>Oud</i> : Warisan Seni dari Timur Tengah describes feather-based <i>risya</i> materials
2015	First arrival of eagle-quill <i>risya</i> in Malaysia	Jabatan Muzium Malaysia	The Levantine quill was exhibited for six months, the earliest verified appearance in the Malay world
2015–2018	Pedagogical introduction begins	Rumah Gambus	Quill tested, maintained, and used in teaching; maintenance process established
2024	Jordanian black eagle quill exhibited	Maybank Foundation Cultural Art Showcase Exhibition in 2024.	First simultaneous public display of two different quills
2024–2025	Consolidation of organological research	Multiple institutions	Article development, performance demonstrations, material-culture documentation
2026	Present scholarly study completed	—	First academic publication dedicated to the eagle-quill <i>risya</i> in Malaysia

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a multi-method qualitative approach that integrates material-culture analysis, object-biography theory, curatorial ethnography, and autoethnographic reflection. These approaches allow for a detailed examination of the eagle-quill *risya* as both a material object and an agent of cultural transmission. The methodology is shaped by the nature of the available data, which includes museum documentation, curatorial records, artisan accounts, photographs, acquisition histories, exhibition narratives, and long-term pedagogical observations. Each methodological component contributes to a comprehensive understanding of how the *risya* entered Malaysia, how it was interpreted within institutional and musical contexts, and how it influenced local performance practice.

MATERIAL-CULTURE ANALYSIS

Material-culture analysis forms the foundation of the investigation. The study examines the physical characteristics of the eagle-quill *risya*, including its shape, texture, flexibility, and crafting techniques. These attributes are compared with those of commonly used *gambus* and *oud* picks in Malaysia, including horn, plastic, and tortoise shell. Observation and tactile examination of both the 2015 and 2024 quills allowed assessment of

artisanal qualities and evaluation of differences between Levantine and Jordanian craftsmanship.

Material-culture methodology also supports the identification of cultural meanings embedded within the object. The eagle holds significant symbolic value. The process of transforming the feather into a playable pick reflects specific artisanal knowledge that is shared across many parts of the Levant. Examining the physical object in its Malaysian context reveals how new meanings emerge when the *risya* is removed from its original cultural environment and placed within an exhibition or pedagogical framework.

OBJECT-BIOGRAPHY APPROACH

The object-biography approach is used to trace the life history of the quills displayed in 2015 and 2024. This approach, informed by the work of Kopytoff and Appadurai, documents the stages through which the *risya* passed, beginning with its crafting in the Levant, followed by acquisition, transportation to Malaysia, public exhibition, and use in pedagogical contexts. Each stage contributes to the object's identity and reveals the social relationships that shape its meaning.

Data for the object-biography analysis were collected from curatorial files, acquisition correspondence, exhibition reports, maker notes, and photographic evidence. These materials allow

the reconstruction of how the quills travelled, were selected for exhibition, were displayed, and were interacted with by visitors. The 2015 exhibition at Jabatan Muzium Malaysia provides the earliest documented appearance of the eagle-quill *risya* in the Malay world. The 2024 exhibition by Maybank Foundation adds a second major chapter to the object's biography, particularly because it includes a Jordanian black eagle quill presented alongside the earlier Levantine quill. Together, these events form the empirical basis of the object's Malaysian biography.

CURATORIAL ETHNOGRAPHY

Curatorial ethnography is used to analyse the author's involvement as curator, interpreter, and educator. This method allows the study to examine how curatorial decisions influence cultural interpretations and public engagement. In line with Dudley (2021), the study also treats the exhibited *risya* as a material object whose presence and display shape visitor understanding. Curatorial ethnography views the curator as an active participant who shapes the meaning of objects within museum narratives and public exhibition contexts (Macdonald, 2019). It also recognises the curator's ability to facilitate cross-cultural understanding through the organisation of exhibitions and interpretive materials.

The author curated both the 2015 and 2024 exhibitions and documented the processes involved in object acquisition, selection, thematic framing, and display design. Field notes taken during the planning and execution of the exhibitions provide insights into the conceptual choices that affected how the *risya* was presented to the Malaysian public. Observations of visitor reactions, institutional feedback, and post-exhibition discussions contribute to the understanding of how the object was received.

This approach also highlights the influence of institutional contexts. Jabatan Muzium Malaysia and the Maybank Foundation operate within different cultural and organisational frameworks, and their approaches to heritage presentation shaped the interpretation of the *risya*. These institutional differences provide additional insight into how the object's meaning evolved between 2015 and 2024.

AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC REFLECTION

Autoethnography forms the final methodological component. This approach acknowledges the author's

position as both a practitioner and a researcher who has worked extensively in Malaysian *oud* and *gambus* education. Autoethnographic reflection draws on two decades of teaching, performance, and artistic collaboration across Malaysian higher education institutions. The author introduced the eagle-quill *risya* into Malaysian pedagogy after the 2015 exhibition and continued to promote and demonstrate its use following the 2024 exhibition.

Autoethnographic data include journal notes, class observations, workshop feedback, and personal reflections recorded during the introduction of the quill into teaching contexts. These materials reveal how students responded to the new material, how their technique adapted, and how the quill influenced the production of tone. Autoethnography provides context for understanding how the introduction of objects affects local performance practice and how new materials can shape artistic development.

The rarity of the object justifies the use of autoethnography, given the limited availability of external literature and the need to document experiential knowledge that would otherwise remain unrecorded. The approach is also consistent with practice-led research within ethnomusicology and performing arts studies, where the researcher's embodied knowledge is recognised as a valuable source of data.

DATA INTEGRATION AND ANALYTICAL STRATEGY

The final analytical step involves integrating data from the four methodological components. The material-culture analysis provides insight into the physical and artisanal attributes of the *risya*. The object-biography approach reconstructs the historical trajectory of the quills. Curatorial ethnography explains how exhibition narratives shaped public understanding. Autoethnography reveals how the object influenced performance practice after its introduction into pedagogy.

These combined approaches allow the study to address its central research questions. The analysis provides a comprehensive account of how the eagle-quill *risya* entered Malaysia, how it developed cultural significance within local contexts, and how its introduction contributed to changes in *the performance practices of gambus and oud*. The multi-method design also ensures that the findings are grounded in robust empirical evidence and well-aligned with current research approaches in

ethnomusicology, museum studies, and material-culture scholarship.

Triangulation was achieved by cross-referencing curatorial documentation, maker correspondence, tactile examination of the quills, exhibition archives, and long-term pedagogical observations. This multi-source corroboration strengthened the reliability of the analysis and mitigated researcher bias. It ensured that interpretations were grounded in converging evidence rather than a single perspective.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study did not involve human subjects and relied solely on object analysis, curatorial records, and practice-based reflections drawn from the author's teaching contexts. As such, it posed minimal ethical risk. All information relating to makers, institutions, and exhibition activities was used with permission, and object-handling procedures followed institutional guidelines for responsible engagement with cultural materials. The study adheres to

established ethical standards in museum research, ethnomusicology, and practice-led documentation.

FINDINGS

CRAFTSMANSHIP AND MATERIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE EAGLE-QUILL RISYA

The examination of the two quills displayed in 2015 and 2024 reveals several distinctive physical and artisanal qualities. Both objects were produced through traditional Levantine craft techniques that rely on the selection, curing, and shaping of eagle feathers. The quill displayed in 2015 originated from an *oud* maker in Palestine who followed inherited methods that have circulated through Levantine craft lineages. The 2024 quill, produced in Jordan, reflects similar artisanal principles, although slight differences in curvature and stiffness suggest regional variation in selection and treatment processes.



Figure 2: Levantine eagle-quill risya displayed at the Maybank Foundation Cultural Art Showcase Exhibition in 2024. (Photograph by the author.)

The shaping of the quill requires careful trimming to achieve the desired thickness and balance. Artisans typically remove the outer layers of the feather shaft and refine the tip into a playable point. Ethnographic accounts of Levantine craftsmanship describe this process as both delicate and time-consuming, and it requires a high level of tactile sensitivity (Racy, 2003; Touma, 1996). The resulting *risya* exhibits a natural flexibility that responds to subtle changes in playing technique, which distinguishes it from more rigid materials such as horn or plastic.

The quills displayed in Malaysia exhibited slight natural curvature that was intentionally preserved. This curvature influences the angle of attack on the strings and contributes to the nuance of tone production. Careful visual inspection of both objects during the exhibitions confirmed the presence of fine polishing along the playing edge, which suggests that the artisans shaped the quills to optimise smooth contact with the string.

MAINTENANCE REQUIREMENTS AND ORGANIC MATERIAL PRESERVATION

The study finds that the eagle-quill *risya* requires a specialised maintenance routine due to its organic composition. Organic materials are highly sensitive to heat, humidity, and handling conditions that are intensified in Malaysia's tropical climate. To prevent drying, cracking, and structural weakening, the author adopted a periodic treatment recommended by Levantine artisans, which involves soaking the quill in olive oil for two to three days every three months. This method reflects long-standing artisanal practices for preserving feather-based plectra and is consistent with conservation principles for organic musical materials. Barclay and Drews (2006) note that natural fibres such as feather, horn, and bone require controlled hydration or oiling to stabilise their structure and prevent brittleness.

Over several years of teaching, demonstration, and handling, the quill responded positively to this conditioning method. The treated quill retained



Figure 3: The olive oil conditioning process is used to preserve the flexibility and structural integrity of the eagle-quill *risya*. (Photograph by the author.)

its flexibility, avoided brittleness, and maintained a smooth playing surface. In contrast, when left untreated, the quill exhibited early signs of dryness and a heightened risk of micro-fracture. These observations correspond closely with conservation literature, which emphasises that organic musical materials deteriorate rapidly in unstable or humid environments without active preservation.

This preservation requirement also helps explain why historical evidence of feather-based plectra is scarce in tropical regions. Organic objects degrade quickly without appropriate care, resulting in low survival rates in both private collections and museum archives. The need for periodic conditioning, therefore, provides empirical support

for the absence of such materials in earlier Southeast Asian organological records.

TECHNICAL ADAPTATIONS REQUIRED FOR PERFORMANCE

The introduction of the **eagle quill** into Malaysian pedagogy revealed several technical considerations that distinguish it from other pick materials commonly used with the *gambus*. The quill is typically thinner, more flexible, and more delicate than plastic or horn picks. These characteristics require adjustments in grip, finger pressure, and right-hand movements. Students who were accustomed to stiffer materials needed to reduce hand tension and adopt a lighter stroke to avoid damaging the quill.



Figure 4: Right-hand grip and attack angle used when playing with the eagle-quill *risya*. The material's flexibility requires lighter tension and refined wrist control. (Photograph by the author.)

During classroom demonstrations and individual lessons, the author observed that the quill encouraged a more refined wrist motion. The material's natural flexibility enabled smoother transitions between upstrokes and downstrokes. This quality is particularly beneficial for traditional Arab-style tremolo playing, which relies on subtle micro-movements. Unlike plastic picks, which often produce a prominent clicking sound during rapid tremolo, the quill produced a gentler contact with the string and allowed for greater continuity between strokes.

The quill's narrow profile also influenced articulation. The point of contact created a rounded attack rather than the more forceful onset produced by thicker picks. As a result, students reported

becoming more aware of finger stability, pick angle, and the distribution of right-hand energy. These observations align with Racy's (2003) description of Arab oud technique, which emphasises sensitivity, lightness, and control, and further reflect Touma's (1996) emphasis on nuanced right-hand articulation as a defining aesthetic of Arab performance practice.

TONAL CHARACTERISTICS AND ACOUSTIC BEHAVIOUR

The tonal qualities of the eagle-quill *risya* are among the most distinctive findings of this study. The quill produced a warm and rounded sound with softer transients. This contrasts with the brighter and more percussive tone produced by plastic picks. The

quill's natural flexibility facilitated subtle, dynamic shading, particularly in melodic lines that required expressive phrasing.

During performance demonstrations, the author observed that the quill enhanced the continuity of melodic gestures. This quality was especially evident in taq̄sīm improvisation, where expressive microphrasing and delicate dynamic control are central to the performance aesthetic. The quill's ability to reduce string noise also contributed to a cleaner and more focused sound profile, reinforcing the importance of subtle sonic control in Arab musical practice (Marcus, 1993).

The acoustic behaviour of the quill supports earlier ethnomusicological observations regarding the importance of pick materials in *oud* performance. Shiloah (1995) noted that historical plectra influenced tone colour and performance style. The present findings confirm that the material of the *risya* shapes not only sound production but also the instrument's expressive potential. In the Malaysian context, the warm tonal qualities of the quill introduced an expressive sound not previously available to local musicians.

CULTURAL SYMBOLISM AND LEVANTINE CRAFT KNOWLEDGE

The eagle as a symbol holds cultural significance in parts of the Levant. It is associated with strength, leadership, and elevated status within regional iconography. The transformation of the feather into a musical tool, therefore, carries symbolic meaning that extends beyond its functional purpose. Interviews and artisan notes from the Levant indicate that the selection of eagle feathers for crafting plectra is linked to respect for the animal's symbolic stature. This association adds cultural depth to the object's identity.

When the quill was introduced at Malaysian exhibitions, visitors expressed curiosity about its symbolism. Museum documentation shows that exhibition narratives helped contextualise the quill within its cultural origins, which enhanced public understanding and appreciation. The 2024 display of both quills offered visitors an opportunity to compare regional variations in craftsmanship and symbolism.



Figure 5. Comparative display of Levantine and Jordanian eagle-quill risya showcasing variations in material selection and artisanal shaping. (Photograph by the author.)

The integration of the eagle-quill *risya* into Malaysian pedagogy created a new cultural layer that linked Middle Eastern craft knowledge with local performance practice. Students who attended workshops and classes gained exposure not only to the material but also to the cultural traditions associated with it. This process reflects how objects facilitate cultural transmission, as discussed in material-culture theory.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show that the introduction of the eagle-quill *risya* into Malaysia presents a significant development in the country's musical organology and heritage landscape. The presence of the quill in Malaysian exhibitions and pedagogy demonstrates a form of material transmission that has not been previously documented in the Malay world. This discussion connects the empirical findings to wider debates in material-culture theory, organology, curatorial practice, and the evolution of Malaysian performance traditions.

MATERIAL AGENCY AND THE EXPANSION OF LOCAL ORGANOLOGY

Material-culture theory suggests that objects possess agency through the meanings they acquire in various cultural contexts. The trajectory of the eagle-quill *risya*, from Levantine artisanal workshops to Malaysian exhibitions, illustrates this principle. Once publicly displayed, the quill took on new cultural functions that extended beyond its original musical purpose. It became a heritage object, a curatorial tool, and a pedagogical resource. These new layers of meaning support Appadurai's argument that objects acquire value through circulation and social engagement.

The findings show that the quill's biography in Malaysia comprises several stages: acquisition, display, interpretation, maintenance, and pedagogical adaptation. Each stage contributes to the expansion of Malaysian organological knowledge. Historically, the *gambus* in Malaysia developed without exposure to feather-based plectra. The quill, therefore, fills a previously unrecorded gap in the understanding of how global *oud* traditions intersect with local performance practice.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PERFORMANCE PRACTICE AND TECHNICAL ADAPTATION

The technical adjustments required for playing with the eagle quill reveal how material objects can influence performance traditions. The quill's flexibility and responsiveness encouraged musicians to refine their right-hand technique and explore more nuanced articulation. These adaptations align with performance aesthetics found in Arab *oud* traditions, particularly in the expressive shaping of melodic lines found in *taqsīm*.

The distinct tonal qualities produced by the quill also suggest that material changes can reshape the sonic identity of the *gambus*. Plastic and horn plectra produce sharper attacks and brighter timbres, which have become normalised in Malaysian *gambus* practice. The introduction of the eagle quill offers an alternative sound profile, warmer and more fluid. This opens new possibilities for stylistic experimentation among contemporary performers. The tonal behaviour of the quill, therefore, contributes to an expanded understanding of how the *gambus* can sound and how articulation can be shaped through material choice.

These findings support Racy's argument that performance practice is deeply affected by the physical tools that musicians employ. The material of the plectrum is not simply a technical choice but a cultural decision that influences the expressive range of an instrument.

CURATOR AS CULTURAL MEDIATOR

The role of the curator emerges as a central factor in the interpretation and transmission of the eagle-quill *risya*. The curator does not merely present the object; they shape the narrative that determines how audiences understand it. The exhibitions in 2015 and 2024 framed the quill within the broader heritage of Middle Eastern music. They provided Malaysian visitors with context not available through private collections alone.

Curatorial ethnography shows that the decisions made in selecting, displaying, and interpreting the quill directly affected how the public perceived the object. Exhibition text, placement, and accompanying explanations influenced visitor engagement. The 2024 exhibition, in particular, created opportunities for comparative understanding by displaying both quills side by side.

This process demonstrates the potential of exhibitions to serve as platforms for organological education. The museum setting validates the object as part of Malaysia's cultural landscape and positions it within a national heritage framework. Curatorial intervention, as such, acts as a bridge between foreign musical traditions and local practitioners.

PRESERVATION CHALLENGES AND THE NATURE OF ORGANIC MUSICAL OBJECTS

The maintenance requirements of the quill highlight the challenges of preserving organic musical objects in tropical climates. The periodic olive oil conditioning was essential for preventing deterioration. This finding supports conservation literature that emphasises the vulnerability of organic materials to environmental conditions. The need for regular treatment helps explain why historical records of feather-based plectra are virtually absent in Southeast Asia.

This knowledge is important for museums and collectors who wish to preserve similar materials. The study demonstrates that such objects require active conservation practices rather than passive storage. Future research on the preservation of organic materials used in musical instruments may benefit from the documentation provided here.

CULTURAL EXCHANGE AND THE MOVEMENT OF ARTISANAL KNOWLEDGE

The arrival of the quill in Malaysia illustrates a form of cultural exchange that aligns with the historical patterns identified in the author's earlier work in *The Origins of the Gambus*. Although the earlier study addressed the introduction of the *gambus* through Ottoman and Hadrami networks, the present research shows that material components continue to move across regions in contemporary times. The quill represents the continuation of craft traditions that have persisted in the Levant for generations.

The study suggests that cultural transmission does not only occur through instruments or repertoire. It also occurs through the movement of materials and tools. This perspective broadens the understanding of how musical traditions evolve and adapt when they enter new cultural environments. The arrival of the eagle quill in Malaysia, therefore, forms part of a longer narrative of Middle Eastern influences in the Malay world.

SIGNIFICANCE FOR MALAYSIAN MUSICAL HERITAGE

The introduction and documentation of the eagle-quill *risya* mark an important moment in Malaysian musical heritage. The object represents a tangible connection to the broader world of Middle Eastern *oud* traditions. Its presence in national exhibitions and educational settings enriches the cultural landscape and offers new possibilities for artistic expression.

This study demonstrates that even small musical objects can have significant heritage value. The quill contributes to a more complete understanding of Malaysian *gambus* practice and highlights the role of practitioners and curators in shaping cultural knowledge. The findings also invite further research into other accessory materials used with the *gambus* and *oud*, and how these materials influence technique, repertoire, and sound.

CONCLUSION

This study presents the first scholarly documentation of the eagle-quill *risya* within the Malaysian context and demonstrates its significance for the country's musical, cultural, and organological heritage. The introduction of this material into Malaysia through the 2015 exhibition at Jabatan Muzium Malaysia and the 2024 Cultural Art Showcase Exhibition by Maybank Foundation provides the earliest verified evidence of feather-based plectra within the Malay world. These events allowed the quill to develop new roles as an exhibition object, a pedagogical tool, and a catalyst for further inquiry into Middle Eastern musical materials.

The findings show that the eagle quill possesses distinctive artisanal, technical, and acoustic characteristics that set it apart from the pick materials typically used in Malaysian *gambus* practice. Its flexibility, responsiveness, and tonal warmth contribute to a performance aesthetic that aligns closely with Arab *oud* traditions. The quill's delicate structure and organic composition require specific maintenance practices, which reflect the knowledge systems of Levantine artisans and reveal the conservation challenges associated with feather-based plectra in tropical climates. These discoveries provide new information for organologists, performers, and museum professionals who engage with organic musical materials.

The study highlights the importance of curatorial practice in the interpretation and transmission of musical heritage. The curator plays a key role in shaping the public understanding of rare materials and facilitating cultural exchange through object-based knowledge. The exhibitions discussed in this study provided Malaysian audiences with access to a previously unknown aspect of Middle Eastern music. They helped integrate the quill into local artistic and educational contexts.

The research also shows that cultural transmission continues through instruments and accessories. The arrival of the eagle quill reinforces earlier arguments on the long-standing relationship between the Middle East and the Malay world, as discussed in the author's previous publication on the origins of the *gambus*. The quill's biography in Malaysia contributes to this broader narrative and expands the definition of what constitutes meaningful cultural heritage.

Overall, the study demonstrates that small musical objects such as plectra play an important role in shaping performance practice, instrument identity, and heritage interpretation. The documentation of the eagle-quill *risya* provides a new foundation for future research on material culture, organology, and cross-cultural musical exchange in Southeast Asia. It also invites musicians, researchers, and curators to reconsider the value of accessory materials in the study of musical traditions and to recognise the potential of such objects to enrich national heritage.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author extends sincere appreciation to all institutions, colleagues, and students who contributed directly or indirectly to this study, and to the editorial team for their valuable guidance. Limited assistance from AI tools (QuillBot and

Copilot) was used solely for grammar refinement and language clarity. All ideas, arguments, and interpretations presented are entirely the author's own.

REFERENCES

- Appadurai, A. (Ed.). 1988. *The social life of things: Commodities in cultural perspective*. Cambridge University Press.
- Barclay, R., & Drews, J. 2006. *The care of historic musical instruments*. Canadian Conservation Institute.
- Dudley, S. 2021. *Museum materialities: Objects, engagements, interpretations*. Routledge.
- Farmer, H. G. 1929. *A history of Arabian music to the XIIIth century*. Luzac and Co.
- Hooper-Greenhill, E. 1992. *Museums and the shaping of knowledge*. Routledge.
- Hoskins, J. 1998. *Biographical objects: How things tell the stories of people's lives*. Routledge.
- Kopytoff, I. 1986. The cultural biography of things: Commoditization as process. In A. Appadurai (Ed.), *The social life of things: Commodities in cultural perspective* pp. 64–91. Cambridge University Press.
- Macdonald, S. 2019. *A companion to museum studies* (2nd ed.). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Marcus, S. 1993. The interface between theory and practice: Intonation in Arab music. *Asian Music*, 24(2): 39–58.
- Miller, D. (Ed.). 2005. *Materiality*. Duke University Press.
- Pearce, S. M. (1994). Museum objects. In S. M. Pearce (Ed.), *Interpreting objects and collections* (pp. 9–11). Routledge.
- Picken, L. 1975. *Folk musical instruments of Turkey*. Oxford University Press.
- Racy, A. J. 2003. *Making music in the Arab world: The culture and artistry of ʿarab*. Cambridge University Press.
- Raja Mohd Yusof, R. Z. 2025. The origins of the *gambus* (ʿūd) in Malaysia: A two-channel hypothesis of Ottoman cultural exchange and Hadrami diaspora. *Malaysian Journal of Music*, 14(1): 41–57.
- Raja Zulkarnain. 2013. *Oud: Warisan seni dari Timur Tengah*. Institut Terjemahan & Buku Malaysia.
- Shiloah, A. 1995. *Music in the world of Islam: A socio-cultural study*. Wayne State University Press.
- Touma, H. H. 1996. *The music of the Arabs*. Amadeus Press.
- Wright, O. 1978. *The modal system of Arab and Persian music, A.D. 1250–1300*. Oxford University Press.