



The Sarawak Museum Journal

Vol. LXX No. 91

December 2012



ISSN: 0375-3050

E-ISSN: 3036-0188

Citation: Connie Lim Keh Nie and Mohd. Fadzil Abdul Rahman. (2012). The Lun Bawang Bamboo Band Ensemble. The Sarawak Museum Journal, LXX (91) : 39-54

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ABSTRACT

The Lun Bawang bamboo band which is locally known as *ngiup suling* and *ngiup bas* is a unique trademark of the Sarawak Lun Bawang community (formerly Sarawak Murut). It is widely played during festivals and special occasions in church. Since this bamboo ensemble is always regarded as the musical icon of the community, the question here is whether the bamboo band originated from the Lun Bawang community. Is it really a traditional musical instrument solely owned by the Lun Bawang people? This article aims to trace the origin of the Bamboo Band, its physical aspects in terms of the musical instruments, its repertoire, functions and current status of the ensemble in today's society.

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Introduction

The bamboo band normally consists of 36 members with 15 flute (*suling*) players, 20 *bas* players and one bass drummer. The *suling*, the transverse flute is an aerophone. It is commonly referred to as a wind instrument in which sound is produced by the vibration of air blown into the hollow tube of the musical piece. The *suling* is mainly played by the ladies. The *bas* is an aerophone which is usually played by men. It is made of two parallel bamboo tubes connected by two short thin bamboo at right angle. The *tubung*, which is the bass drum serves as the time keeper; playing each and every beat of the song. It is classified as a membranophone and is also played only by men.

It is said that one of the common aerophone (wind instrument) found among the ethnic groups in Borneo is the bamboo flute. There are different types of horizontal bamboo flute of various sizes and styles. The side-blown *suling* played by the Lun Dayeh of Sabah is a traditional solo instrument which is developed from their nose flute, *telingut* (Pugh-Kitingan, 1999). The *telingut* is also found among the Lun Bawang, which is an end-blown flute played vertically with two to three finger holes. According to Jerry Samuel Daring of Long Semadoh Rayeh, Lawas District, the *telingut* was later modified to a six-hole

side-blown flute which became the *suling* used in the present day Lun Bawang bamboo band.



Fig. 1: The Bamboo Band of Long Pengalih, Lawas Damit.

(Photograph: Lim Yu Seng)

Suling

Suling is a type of flute which is held horizontally when played. When performed in an ensemble, the *suling* takes the lead by playing the melody line in unison.

Construction of the instrument

The transverse *suling* flute examined at Long Semadoh Rayeh is made from a length of thin bamboo, called *bulu' sebiling* locally. It is 1.5 cm in diameter and 42 cm in length with six finger holes on the front side. Each finger hole is 0.9 to 1.1 cm in diameter, and the first finger hole is 18.1 cm away from the mouth hole. The distances between the six front finger holes, starting from the first finger hole to the sixth finger hole are 2.2 cm, 2.1 cm, 2.2 cm, 2.1 cm and 2.1 cm respectively. The wall of the bamboo tube is 0.15 cm thick, and from the top to the mouth hole, the wall is partially sliced away to a thickness of 1.0 cm. The blowing end of the transverse flute is closed by the natural bamboo node. At a distance of 1.5 cm from the end of the bamboo

node, a small hole about 1.0 cm in diameter is pierced through the bamboo wall to make the mouth hole. The skin around the node is sliced slightly to reach the same level as the bamboo tube so as to allow the mouth to rest more comfortably against the instrument.

Depicting the sound of piccolo, a shorter version of *suling* is also made from *sebling* bamboo but is about half of its length. The higher pitch *suling* is only played by one female player in the bamboo band ensemble so as to highlight the melody line. It is also used for special effects such as trill.

Playing and Sound Quality

The tone of the *suling* is soft and agile, moving to brighter tones on high notes. By overblowing, a higher octave sound is produced with the same fingering. The player holds the flute horizontally, clinching sideways to the right. The flute is supported primarily at the base by the left forefinger and the thumb of the right hand. Through observation, a few left-handed players hold their flutes horizontally to the left for they feel more comfortable by doing so.

Both sizes of *suling* has six finger holes for the first, second and third fingers of each hand whereas the right hand is placed at the farther end of the lips. When all the finger holes are closed, the lowest note is produced. Lifting each finger in turn, starting from the third finger of the right hand, produces an octave of the natural scale. The natural scale of the flute varies, depending strongly on the length of the flute. The *suling* can only play major scale, thus it could not produce the chromatic scale.

Playing Method

From the perspective of a flute player, it is observed that the tonguing method is used by the Lun Bawang to control tone production. By effectively employing the tonguing method, the player silently forms the syllable "tu". On the other hand, the player could also play smoothly from one note to the next note by just having their embouchure blowing across the mouth hole. However, the sound produced is not as effective as those produced by the tonguing method. Every note produced by *suling* will be precisely played and clearly projected by using the tonguing method that leads to unison in playing the main melody. The fingering for *suling* is shown in Fig. 2.

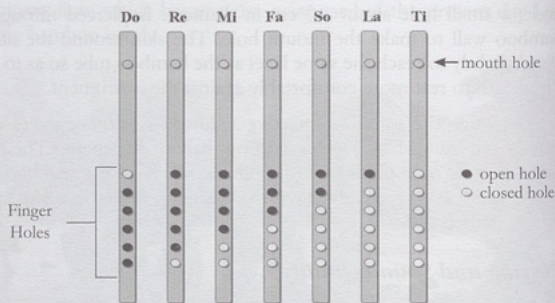


Fig. 2: Fingering chart of *suling*.

Bas

The *bas* instrument is made from bamboo with larger cylindrical diameter width called *bulu' talang* in its local name. The bamboo is opened at the top and closed at the lower end by its node. A long mouthpiece of *sebiling* bamboo or *bulu' sebiling* enters the body of the instrument at right angle near the top and extends into a rectangular handle on the other side. Eric Taylor (1989: 53) described the *bas* played by Lun Dayeh¹ in Sabah as

"Trumpet-type, which consists of two-parallel tubes, one longer and thicker than the other, connected by two short tubes at right angles, with the upper one projecting through the large tube to form a mouthpiece."

In addition, a large hole is cut at the side of the instrument near its lower end, with a smaller hole on the opposite side near the top. Beewax (*peranget*) is used to seal the joints where the tubes meet or pass through a larger tube.

The instrument comes in various sizes and produces one pitch only which includes overtones. The *bas* varies in length from 24 cm to 75 cm. There are nine types of *bas* namely "DO" high *bas*, "DO" low *bas*, "RE" *bas*, "MI" *bas*, "FA" *bas*, "SO" high *bas*, "SO" low *bas*, "LA" *bas* and "TI" high *bas* which are all made in different sizes. Excluding the "SO" high and low *bas*, the other six have a hole on the same side near the open portion towards the end of the resonator, and one at the opposite side near the lower closed end.