

BOWED LUTES AMONG THE BAJAU AND THE IRANUN OF SABAH: THEIR STRUCTURES, PERFORMANCE, MUSIC AND POSSIBLE ORIGINS¹

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Abstract

Bowed lutes, often called *biola*, are relatively rare in Sabah. They were traditionally found only among certain maritime communities, such as the Brunei and Kadayan, the Iranun, some west coast Bajau and east coast Bajau, including the Sama Dilaut. In the Kota Belud District of Sabah, the *biola* (Bajau) or *biula* (Iranun) is a three-stringed bowed lute shaped like a violin. It is stood in an upright position in front of the seated performer and supported by their right foot, with its scroll leaning backwards towards one shoulder. It is bowed with a horsehair or, nowadays, nylon stringed bow. Among the Sama Dilaut of the east coast, however, the *biola* has four strings and resembles the European violin. When played, it is usually held with its base against the performer's chest like a fiddle. Many scholars claim the four-stringed *biola* originated from the European violin and viola that the Portuguese introduced into Southeast Asia. Some assume the same origin for the three-stringed instruments. Some musicians, however, say the violin came from the Philippines. The three-stringed instruments and their performance reflect bowed lutes of Arab origin. This paper will compare the organology, performance practice and music of the west coast Bajau *biola* and Iranun *biula* with the east coast Bajau *biola*, and will suggest possible origins for these instruments.

Keywords: *biola*, *biula*, Bajau, Iranun, Sama Dilaut, Sabah

Introduction

Musical instruments are objects of material culture and, as sound-producers of music, they are part of the intangible cultural heritage of a people (UNESCO 2003). Instruments and the music they play may also indicate historical cultural interactions and exchanges between diverse peoples due to trade, migration and other factors (Kartomi 1981, p. 236).

As noted previously, bowed lutes are largely absent from the variety of traditional musical instruments played among peoples who speak languages from the ancient indigenous Dusunic, Murutic and Paitanic Families of Languages of Sabah, Malaysia's northernmost state located on Borneo Island. The Iranun and the Bajau of the west coast of Kota Belud District, however, play a bowed lute called *biula* (Iranun) or *biola* (Bajau) that resembles a three-stringed violin but with a larger body, longer neck and extended peg box all carved in one piece from a single log of wood. During performance, the instrument is stood somewhat vertically and supported against the right foot of the performer, who sits cross-legged on the floor. The manner of playing and its highly ornamented musical style of music are similar to those of some bowed lutes from the Middle East and northern Africa, indicating a possible Arab origin for this instrument (Pugh-Kitingan, 2004, pp. 38-39, 121,180-182; 2019).²

Historically, Arab and Persian traders were present in the region, especially during the Brunei Empire from the 15th to 17th centuries, which extended as far north as Luzon (Bala 2005). The hierarchical Iranun of Sabah credit Sharif Kabungsuwan, said to be of Arab and Malay ancestry, with introducing Islam into their culture and also to those of related ethnic groups in Mindanao during the 16th century. He is said to have married a high-class Baih (female Datu'), thus producing the Sharif class of equal standing with the highest Datu' class (Cripps 2011, pp. 49-52; Gowing 1979, pp. 20-22; Pugh-Kitingan 2011, pp. 129-131). Today, a small community of Arabs descended from 19th century traders live near the Tidung in Tawau, on the east coast of Sabah. Instruments such as *rabana* frame drums and the *gambus biawak* among the Tidung and others have been developed from similar Arab instruments. Hence, it is possible that a bowed lute of Arab or Middle Eastern origins may have given rise to this *biula/biola* of the Iranun and west coast Bajau.

The maritime Iranun were also regionally important under the Brunei Sultanate throughout the Sulu zone for gong-making, metallurgy, weaving, trading, and slaving. Many high-class Iranun were bestowed titles from the various Brunei Sultans, and some Brunei cultural influences can be observed in Iranun culture, as in other cultures along the west coast of Sabah (Gowing 1979, pp.153-157; Pugh-Kitingan 2010). Hence, Brunei could also have been a source for bowed lutes such as these.

The west coast Bajau are an acephalous society traditionally of fisherfolk, living along the shores. Historically, there has been much cultural contact and some intermarriage between the Bajau and the formerly dominant Iranun of Kota Belud. Although of different ethnolinguistic origins, the two cultures share many musical similarities (Pugh-Kitingan 2004, pp.185-198). Thus, it is not surprising that they play similar bowed lutes.

The Arab origin of older bowed lutes in southeast Asia is evident from other research. Kartomi (2012, pp.52-55), for example, examines the performance and music of a four-stringed *rabab* that accompanies bardic storytelling. She notes that it is shaped like an early alto violin but is cut from soft wood and glued together with sap. Its performance style and music are very different from European music. Indeed, *rabab* is derived from the Arab name for a bowed lute. Her accompanying photographs (Kartomi 2012, p.53), show that this *rabab* is played with the performer seated on the floor but supporting the

instrument against the left foot, not the right. The technique of holding and tautening the bowstring while playing is different from that of the *biula/biola* that I have observed, although elaborate melodic ornamentation and extensive double-stopping techniques are similar. This *rabab* has a shorter neck, smaller body and four strings, unlike the three-stringed Sabahan instruments. Nevertheless, these Sumatran examples suggest Middle Eastern origins for early Southeast Asian bowed lutes that may have been hybridised with later European instruments.

My view of the *biula/biola* being of possible Arab origin has been criticised by some who point to scholarly historical studies that show that the western violin was introduced into southeast Asia by the Portuguese who taught it to their slaves. They have argued that the three-stringed *biula/biola* must have developed from the Portuguese violin. This western violin played a role developing the popular musical genre *Kroncong* that is still widely performed today throughout Indonesia and Malaysia. The violin is also played in many other contexts and is often, but not always, held against the left chest during performance (Kartomi 1997a, 1997b, 2002, 2011; 2012, pp. 10-11, 12-13, 16-17, 20, 22, 24; 2019, pp. 11, 16-17; Storch 2011; Scarff & Rasbi 2019).

Others, point to the possibility that the east coast *biola* in Sabah, which is different from the *biula/biola* type, may have developed from the violin through the Spanish in the Philippines, since the violin is popular among many Sama Bajau peoples of the east coast of Sabah and the Philippines, as well as the Sama Dilaut who are historically sea nomads. Indeed, some Sama Dilaut performers of the four-stringed violin state that their European-type *biola* came from the Philippines. Moreover, Sabah as the northernmost state in Malaysia is situated closer to the Philippines than to Indonesian islands, including Sulawesi.

Thus, this article re-examines the issue of the west coast *biula* and *biola*, and also looks at the violin-type *biola* of the Sama Dilaut. It seeks to answer three basic questions: How is the *biula* and *biola* of the Iranun and west coast Bajau different in structure, performance technique and music from the European violin? How does the Sama Dilaut *biola* or violin compare to the west coastal *biula* and *biola* in structure, performance technique and music? What are the possible origins of these instruments?

The Iranun *Biula* and Bajau *Biola* of Kota Belud

In the Kota Belud District of Sabah, the *biula* (Iranun) or *biola* (West Coast Bajau) is quite different in structure and performance technique from the European violin. It is a three-stringed bowed lute with a body shaped like a violin. Its squarish carved scroll, peg-box, long thick neck, back, sides and base of the body are carved in one piece from a single log of termite-resistant soft wood such as jackfruit or seraya. The front of the body is hollow, and the face with two *f*-shaped holes is a thin layer of wood that is glued over this. The fingerboard is stuck to the neck and extends half-way down this front face, while the string holder is also glued over this front piece. The strings were traditionally made from brass, but nowadays steel strings are used (Figures 1 to 4).

The bow is also cut from a piece of jackfruit wood. It has a handle at one end, and a carved decoration at the other. Its bowstring is made from many strands of long horse hair or, nowadays, nylon fishing line string. Traditionally the Iranun and, more recently, the Bajau of Kota Belud are renowned as horsemen, hence the use of horse hair for the bowstring.

This instrument is played by both men and women. As mentioned above, it is stood in a somewhat upright position supported against the right foot of the seated performer, with its scroll leaning slightly backwards towards one shoulder. It is bowed with the traditional bow, on which the string is manually tautened by the musician's thumb pressed against the third finger, as the first to third fingers hold the bow handle from above supported by the little finger from below. The instrument is held with either the left or right hand and bowed with the opposite hand, depending on whether the performer is right- or left-handed. As examples, the Iranun musician En. Payas bin Dalah of Kg. Payas-Payas (Figure 1) was left-handed and held his bow with his left hand, while Bajau performer En. Alip bin Baa' of Kg. Kuala Abai Seberang (Figure 2) was right-handed.



Figure 1: En. Payas bin Dalah playing the Iranun *biula*
(Source: Fieldwork 1995; Jacqueline Pugh-Kitingan 2004, 121; 2019, p. 111)



Figure 2: En. Alip bin Baa' playing the West Coast Bajau *biola*
(Source: Fieldwork 1995; Jacqueline Pugh-Kitingan 2019, p.112)

There are minor structural differences between the *biula* and the *biola*. The string holder on the Bajau *biola* is longer than that of the Iranun *biula* of Payas, and extends down to the end of the front. The position of the tuning pegs in the pegbox of the Iranun *biula* of Payas is the reverse of those on the Bajau *biola*. Thus, the tuning arrangement of the strings varies. From the performer's left side (the right side of the instrument) on Payas' *biula*, the open strings were tuned intervals of approximately a rising whole tone followed by a falling fifth. The open strings on Alip's *biola* from his left side, were tuned at approximate intervals of a rising fifth and falling whole tone.

Musicians use anthropomorphic and functional nomenclature for the parts of their instruments. Hence, using Iranun terminology (Figure 3), Payas referred to the scroll as *olo a biula* ("head of the *biula*"), while each of the three tuning pegs was *tangila a biula* ("ear of the *biula*"), and its neck was *lieg a biula* ("neck of the *biula*"). The back of the body was called *likud a biula* ("back of the *biula*"), its side was *takilidan* ("side"), and each waist was literally named *kasadan* ("waist"). The upper bout was called *waga a biula* ("shoulder of the *biula*"), the lower front was called *tian a biula* ("abdomen of the *biula*"), and the two *f*-holes on the front were each referred to as *pused a biula* ("navel of the *biula*"). A small protective piece of wood underneath at the base of the *biula* was called *ikug a biula* ("tail of the *biula*"). Collectively, the strings were called *iketian* ("ties") or the Malay *tali* ("strings"). The bridge was referred to as either *tuker a biula* ("support") or *tukud a biula* ("retainer"). Below this on the front was the *iket a biula* or "stringholder". This was tied to the "tail" at the base by a cord loop formed from the ends of the strings.

The bow or *buul a biula* consisted of the *buul* (bow stick), *kapeta* (“place for holding”), and *sumping* (“flower”), a carved decoration at the end opposite the handle. The bow hair consisted of many nylon strings or *tangsi*, although formerly Payas himself used cow hair.

Payas had made his *biula* and the wood of its bow entirely from jackfruit tree wood or *badak* (Iranun). Alip, however, constructed his *biola* from seraya wood, with only the fingerboard, front face, stringholder, bridge, and the bow made from jackfruit wood or *nangka* (West Coast Bajau). Both performers had learned to make and play their instruments from their fathers and grandfathers.

Like Payas, Alip used both anthropomorphic and functional nomenclature for the parts of his instrument (Figure 4). Hence using West Coast Bajau terminology, he referred to the scroll as *tibook biola* (“*biola* head”) where /oo/ is a long vowel. Each of the three tuning pegs were called *telingo biola* (“*biola* ear”). The neck or *kelang biola* (“*biola* neck”) was covered on the front by the fingerboard, described as *dela’ biola* (“*biola* tongue”), and the small protective piece of wood at the base of the body was called *buli’ biola* (“*biola* backside”). The strings were simply named *ingkot biola* (“*biola* strings”). Alip described the *f*-holes functionally as *melua’ soro* (“to release sound”), while the bridge was *tungkat* (“support”) as *tungkat biola*, and the long stringholder was literally *penaan ingkot* (“holder of strings”). This was tied to the “backside” by a cord loop formed from the ends of the strings.

The bow of the *biola* or *pengeet biola* (where /ee/ is a long vowel) consisted of the *batang* or bow stick with a *pengentanan* (“place for holding”) at one end a carving or *ukiran* at the other end. Formerly, Alip used *ingkot kuda* (“horse strings”) or horse hairs for the bowstring, but in later years used *tali tangsi* or nylon string.

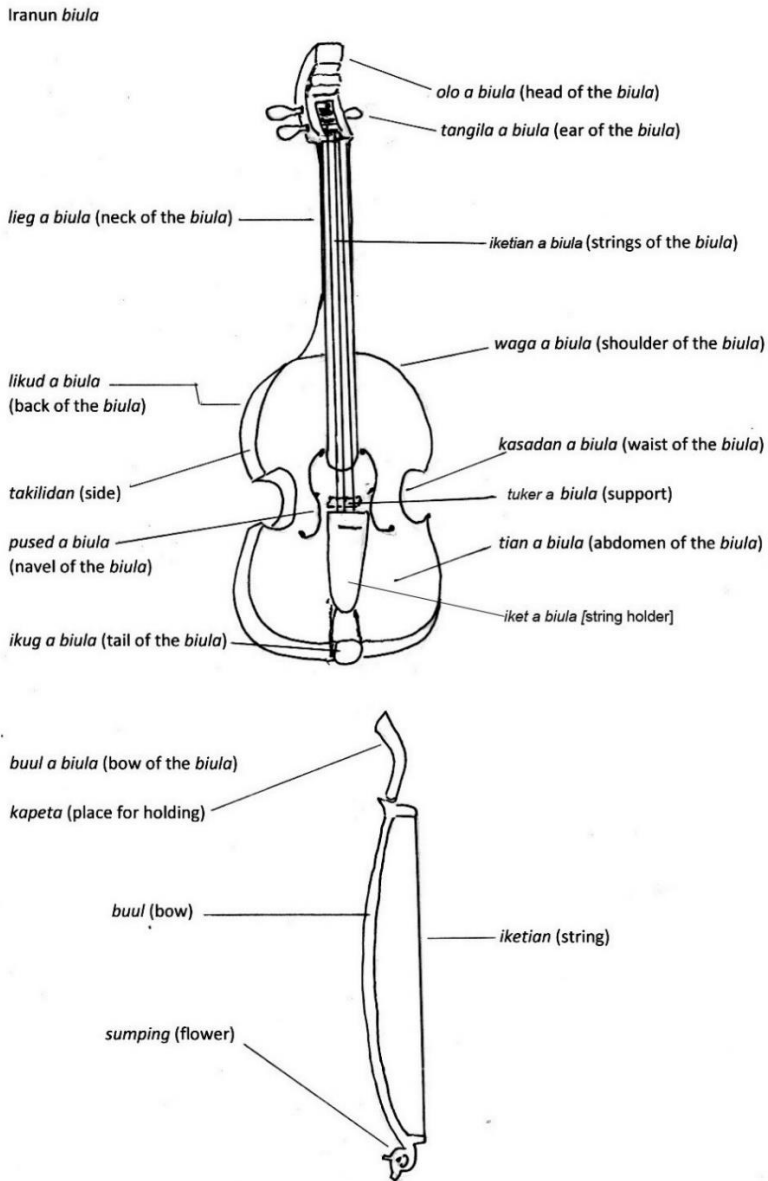


Figure 3: Structure of the Iranun *biula* played by Payas bin Dalah of Kg. Payas-Payas, Kota Belud

(Source: Jacqueline Pugh-Kitingan; Iranun terms checked by Abdul Jalil)

West Coast Bajau *biola*

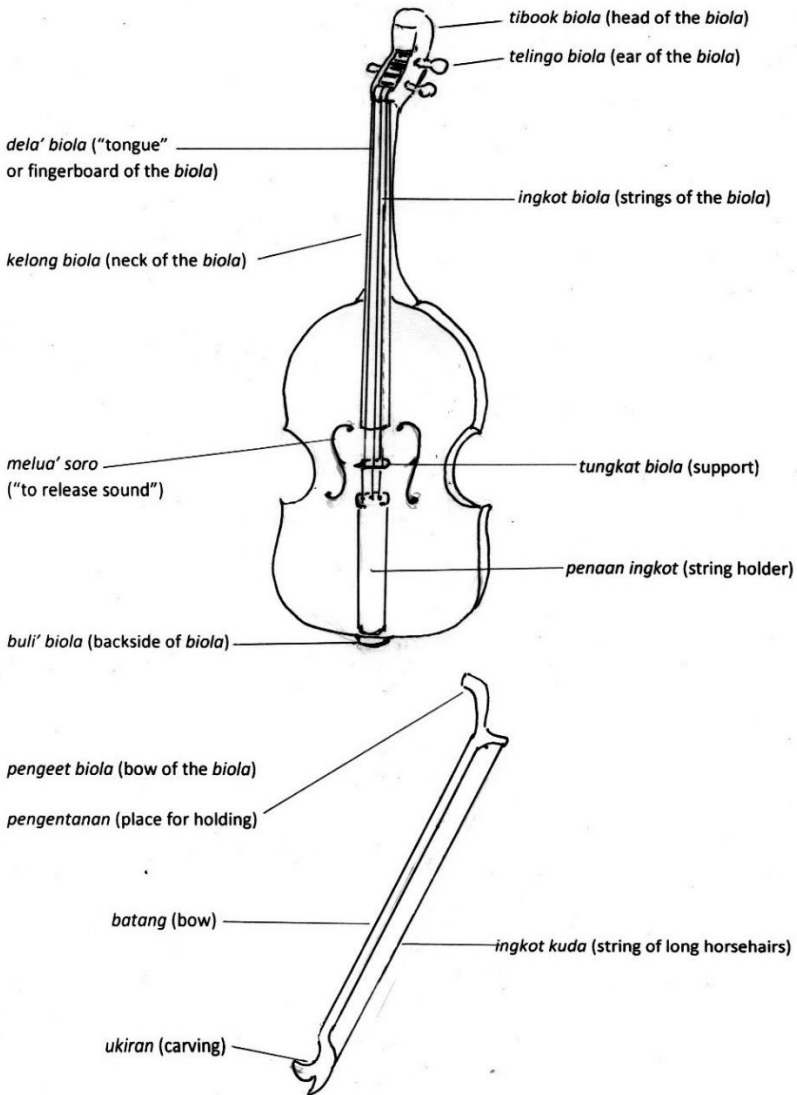


Figure 4: Structure of the west coast Bajau *biola* played by Alip bin Baa' of Kg. Kuala Abai Seberang, Kota Belud

(Source: Jacqueline Pugh-Kitingan; West Coast Bajau terms checked by Mark Miller)

Thus, it can be seen that the Iranun *biula* and the west coast Bajau *biola* are structurally very similar. Although they spoke different languages, Payas and Alip used labels with similar meanings for many of the parts of their instruments and bows. These consisted of both anthropomorphic terminology and functional terms. Thus, the scroll was

the “head” on each instrument, while the tuning pegs comprised the “ears.” The neck was literally the “neck” and the small piece at the base was either a “tail” or the “backside”. In each case, the bridge was described as a “support” for the strings, and the stringholder was literally that – a “stringholder”.

Performance Context and Music of the Iranun *Biula* and Bajau *Biola* of Kota Belud

Among the Iranun and the west coast Bajau, the *biula* or *biola* is regarded as a serious instrument of skilled artistic performance. It can be played solo by both men and women virtuosi at important social events such as weddings, as well as for entertainment in the home.

Pamiula (Iranun) which connotes “music with the *biula*” or *Isun-Isun* (Bajau) suggesting poetic stanzas sung “back-and-forth” between two people or lines performed between voice and instrument, is a genre of call-and-response vocal music based on *pantun*-like quatrains (Iranun: *sambaga sa pantun*; Bajau: *kallang*) between a man and a woman. One of them, often the woman, plays the bowed lute. In this call-and-response duet, the vocal stanzas are embedded in the instrument’s music.

If the genre is performed alone, the singer’s call-and-response stanzas function as a monologue or a soliloquy. Sometimes solo performances are purely instrumental, and can be a medley of different pieces. This is shown in Table 1 which compares the repertoire of Payas with that of Alip. These were recorded on the same day in the two different villages of the musicians. The pieces were played as medleys.

Table 1: Comparison of *Pamiula* (Iranun) and *Isun-Isun* (Bajau) repertoires

<p><i>Biula</i> Performance by En. Payas bin Dalah, Kg. Payas-Payas, Kota Belud (Iranun) Recorded: 25 January 1995</p>	<p><i>Biola</i> Performance by En. Alip bin Baa’, Kg. Kuala Abai Seberang, Kota Belud (Bajau) Recorded: 25 January 1995</p>
<p>1. <i>Kuda Aragam</i> 2. <i>Kallang Ampat (i)</i> 3. <i>Kallang Ampat (ii)</i> 4. <i>Kallang Ampat (iii)</i></p>	<p>1. <i>Keten Langkau</i> 2. <i>Kuda Aragam</i> 3. <i>Isun-Isun</i> 4. <i>Ondok Berunsai</i> 5. <i>Kallang Ampat (3 types)</i></p>

(Source: Fieldwork, 1995: Jacqueline Pugh-Kitingan 2019, pp. 112-113)

Apart from a few brief lines towards the end of his performance, Alip did not sing on this occasion (he was still grieving for his late wife who had passed away some time before), but mostly just played his *biola*. Payas did not sing during the piece called *Kuda Aragam*, but sang with his *biula* in the three *Kallang Ampat*. Similarities in the names of

some pieces reflect the close relationship between the Bajau and the Iranun of Kota Belud, whereby musical pieces can be shared and copied.

As shown previously in the discussion of Payas' performance of the piece *Kuda Aragam* (Pugh-Kitingan 2004, p.180-182), the *biula* music alternated long passages played in the higher register with episodes in the lower register. Payas' lines in that piece tended to have highly ornamented undulating melodic shapes falling to a tonal centre at their ends. He also used extensive double-stopping on the lowest and highest open strings, as well as other pitches.

An excerpt from the same piece, *Kuda Aragam* as played by Alip, is shown in Figure 5. For ease of transcription and analysis, this short excerpt is notated approximately a semitone lower than it sounds.

♩ ≈ 113.3 MM (PUG-KIT Kg. Kuala Abai Serebang 950125/6)
(Excerpt 54 seconds)

Figure 5: Excerpt from a *biola* performance by Alip bin Baa' (Source: Jacqueline Pugh-Kitingan)

The first section of this excerpt is played in the higher register of the instrument. Its music features highly ornamented and undulating melodic lines. The first measure is

characterised by an opening and a closing motif that features a rising semitone. Between the opening and closing of this measure, are two rapid triplet-like motifs, the second of which falls to the closing motif with the rising semitone. The eight measures following after this are extended variations on the patterns in this first measure, and usually end with a falling pattern to the rising semitone motif. Double-stopping enables the highest-pitched open string to be played continuously below these melodic motifs in this first section, except for below the pitch lying a semitone from and leading to the tonic in this closing motif.

In the ninth measure, the music descends to the lower register of the instrument. Although using different pitches, the musical patterns here are similar to that of the previous section. However, the interval in the rising motif at the end of measures is now expanded to a whole tone. Melodic measures end with a falling pattern to this rising whole tone motif. Double-stopping allows the lowest-pitched open string to be played continuously below the rapid melodies, except for below the pitch lying a whole tone below the tonal centre in the rising motif at the end of measures.

Individual *biula/biola* players develop their own musical styles and repertoires within the tradition. This highly ornamented music, however, is somewhat reminiscent of Middle Eastern modalities, but bears no apparent relationship to European systems.

The Sama' Dilaut Violin (*Biola*) of Semporna

The *biola* of the east coast Bajau is played by both men and women among many Sama Dilaut (or “Sea Bajau”) communities and on many islands. Unlike the *biola* or *biula* of Kota Belud, this *biola* is the typical four-stringed European violin. It is normally held in the left-chest position for a right-handed performer and is bowed with the modern screw-type bow with cat-gut string. En. Indal Sapri bin Jumadil is a well-known (left-handed) performer who resides in Kg. Simunul, Semporna. He originally came from Sibutu Island (Figure 6).



Figure 6: En. Indal Sapri bin Jumadil playing his *biola* from Semporna
(Source: Fieldwork 2019; Jacqueline Pugh-Kitingan 2019, p.113)

He first made a *biola* in 1972, when he was only 22 years old and still living on Sibutu. He taught himself to play. His father discouraged him and was very angry, because he thought music was a waste of time. His father hit him, and threw the *biola* away. When he wept bitterly, his father “had repentance,” Indal Sapri said. During a trip to Tawau in 1972, his father bought him the violin that he now plays.

The *biola* of Indal Sapri is a four-stringed European-type violin, and its bow is the standard bow with a screw, pad and frog to control the tension of the ribbon of strings (Figure 7). He calls the bow, including stick and bowstring, *got-got biula* connoting the its movement across the strings.

Indal Sapri refers to the whole instrument as *biola*, but when pressed, he provided names for some parts of the instrument. Thus, the scroll is called *ukil-ukil* (“little carving”), and the tuning pegs are *kolas* (“adjust”). The back of the instrument is *bukug biola* (“*biola* back”), its front is *munda’an biola* (“*biola* front”) and the chin rest is *langal* (“chin”). He described the bridge as *kura-kura* (“turtle”), because its profile resembles the shape of a turtle. The *f*-holes are called *amakosogan biola*, because that is from where the sound comes out.



Figure 7: The *biola* and bow of Indal Sapri bin Jumadil
(Source: Fieldwork)

Since Indal Sapri is left-handed, he holds the violin against the right side of his chest like a fiddle. However, he can play it just as well in other positions. He demonstrated this by playing the instrument while holding it under his right armpit, under his chin, with it standing vertically on his right knee, and even vertically atop his right shoulder.

Performance Context and Music of the Sama Dilaut *Biola* of Semporna

This violin-type *biola* from Sabah's east coast is also a virtuoso instrument. It is performed at weddings and other important social celebrations. It can be played solo, or with other instruments such as those in a jazz combo, with a keyboard, guitar and bass, or even with the traditional *gabbang* xylophone. It can also accompany singing.

Indal Sapri can play any popular tune with his *biola*, and often performs a medley of songs from different traditions. The excerpt in Figure 8 is from the start of a medley of *Kroncong* music and Bajau songs. This example shows the start of his performance which is a rendition of the well-known contemporary *Kroncong* song *Hidupku Sengsara* ("My Life is Miserable") that has been popularised by many singers from both Malaysia and Indonesia.

♩ ≈ 78 MM (PUG-KIT Muzium Tun Sakaran 20190222/1)
(Excerpt 60 seconds)

Figure 8: Excerpt from the start of a *biola* (violin) performance by Indal Sapri
(Source: Jacqueline Pugh-Kitingan)

This music is played in the key of D Major in the Western diatonic scale system. The tune is clearly recognisable, but its metre is very free, and the performer embellishes it with many ornaments. Each measure corresponds to one melodic line of the song. The

first is based on the descending melodic pattern of the opening line, and is followed by the rising melody of the second line. The third measure is a variation on the first, and the fourth a variation on the second that begins rising then falls to the tonic. The fifth and sixth measures present new contrasting material, each rising then falling. The tune from the first and second measures then returns in the seventh and eighth measures. Each musical measure, however, is not an exact replica of the lines of the song tune, but is an highly embellished variation. Double-stopping occurs briefly during the sustained notes at the end of the third and eighth measures.

Conclusions

From the foregoing, it is clear that the Iranun *biula* and west coast Bajau *biola* are structurally very different from the European violin. Each is made from a single log of wood with front face, fingerboard, stringholder and bridge added. They have three, not four strings. In both cases, the seated posture of the performer on the floor, with the upright instrument in front supported against the right foot, the manual tautening technique of bowing, tunings and highly embellished musical styles are also very different from those of the violin and suggest a different, probably Arab, origin. They possibly developed from an older bowed lute that became hybridised with the shape and face of the European violin. These instruments may have come into Iranun culture through their Brunei and Arab connections or through linkages with related Danao peoples of Mindanao, and into west coast Bajau culture from Brunei, Iranun and other maritime contacts. The close proximity and cultural interactions between Bajau and Iranun on the west coast of Sabah has led to deep cultural convergences in their musical practices. Hence, these instruments and musical genres are almost the same in the two music-cultures.

As to the origin of the violin-like shape of the *biula* and *biola*, this may well have been influenced by the western violin from either Spanish or Portuguese sources through Brunei, Mindanao or wider regional trade. Given the structural, performative and musical differences of these instruments from the violin, however, it is incorrect to assert that they developed from the violin that was introduced by the Portuguese.

The four-stringed *biola* played among the Sama Dilaut of Semporna is clearly a European-type violin. En. Indal Sapri stated that the violin in east coast Bajau cultures originated from the Philippines, a view that is generally shared in Semporna. This is probable, since the Malaysian islands off Sabah extend up to the sea border with the Philippines. Spain ruled the Philippines for over 400 years, and to varying extents, Spanish culture and music affected many older Philippine cultures. The Sama Dilaut are traditionally sea nomads travelling between Tawi-Tawi in the Philippines, Semporna in Sabah, Bone in Sulawesi and other places. As such, they are receivers and transmitters of culture, and this process continues today. Hence, it is not surprising that postures such as holding the violin against the chest while playing should be widespread in maritime Southeast Asia, whether among peoples historically influenced by Spanish, Portuguese or other cultures. Moreover, from the practical Sama Bajau perspective, this is the most

comfortable position in which to play the instrument, especially while seated in a small family houseboat.

Musically, this versatile instrument plays a variety of traditional and contemporary Bajau songs, Malay pop songs and modern *Kroncong* music in both solo and ensemble settings. It may have developed from a Portuguese violin or viola. But given the close historical proximity of the Philippines and the strong migratory connections of the Sama Dilaut with that area, the east coast *biola* might well have originated from a Spanish violin. Further research is needed to fully answer these questions of origins.

Endnotes

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² The Iranun of Sabah speak a language of the Danao Family of Languages that also includes the languages Maranao, Magindanao and Iranon of Mindanao, Philippines. They traditionally live on the west coast of Sabah and the Tungku area of Lahad Datu District. The Bajau speak languages of the Sama Family of Languages that is dispersed across insular Southeast Asia. There are two main Bajau cultural complexes in Sabah, those of the west coast and northern coastal areas who speak a language labelled West Coast Bajau and those of the east coast who include speakers of Southern Sama and various other Sama languages.

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