

# EVOLUTION OF SAPE: FROM LONGHOUSE TO THE INTERNATIONAL STAGE

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## ABSTRACT

Sape, a boat lute shape, plucked stringed musical instrument played among the Kayan and Kenyah people in Central Borneo and the Dayak in Kalimantan Indonesia. This musical instrument is often used as the symbol in promoting Malaysia in the areas of arts, culture and tourism. It is also the symbol of the state of Sarawak. In Sarawak, sape is the traditional instrument of the Kenyah, Kayan, Kelabit, Penan and other ethnic tribes of Orang Ulu community living in Kapit, Bintulu, Miri, Limbang district. Over the past 40 years, the instrument is brought to travel and perform in different parts of the world by different sape players. This shows that the sape music which is traditionally played to accompany dances during festivals and as a form of entertainment in the longhouses and villages is now performing at musical festivals such as the arts, cultural and tourism promotions in various countries. Hence, this paper aims to trace the development of sape in terms of its physical structure and the evolution of sape from the perspective of its performance practice and repertoire.

**Keywords:** Sape, Musical Instrument, Evolution, Performance Practice

## INTRODUCTION

Once the name of the musical instrument 'sape' is uttered, what came across the majority's mind is the image of a guitar like instrument played by plucking the strings. Due to this resemblance, sape is also known as the guitar of Borneo. Today, the sape music is not only popular among the local music lovers, but has received an overwhelming response from the traditional music lovers from all around the world.

### *A Brief History of Sape*

The sape seems to have evolved from a two-stringed instrument. In 1896, Roth said that Sir Spencer St. John had spoken of a

*“two-stringed instrument, resemble a rough guitar: the body was shaped like a decked Malay trading prahu, with a small hole an inch in diameter in the center; the strings were fine threads of rattan twisted and drawn up tightly by means of tuning-keys; however, the sound produced was not very different from that of a tightly-drawn string.”* Roth (1896:262).

In 1904, Shelford wrote about the sape as follows:

*“Two-stringed guitar strummed with fingers. A large heavy instrument cut out of a block of 'tapang' wood. The resonator has been hollowed out at the back to a depth of from*