The art of the Malay letter

From the earliest 16th-century examples to those of the late 19th century, Malay letters encapsulate the finest features of Malay language and culture. Serving a primarily diplomatic function, they were subject to elaborate rules of form, composition and appearance, dependent upon the relative rank of the correspondents. These important historical documents provide a glimpse into the complex structure of Malay society.

The earliest known Malay Peninsula letter, dated 1719, is from the Sultan of Johor to Louis XV of France.

In this 1821 letter to Lord Minto, the Governor-General of Bengal, the Sultan of Kedah requested help against the Siamese. Assistance was not however forthcoming and the state fell to the invaders in 1821.

This 1884 letter, from Sultan Muhammad of Selangor to E. A. Blundell, Governor of the Straits Settlements, merely acknowledges receipt of a letter. However, a scribbled note on the back shows it was a response to Blundell's announcement of the outbreak of the Crimean War. The seal at the bottom of the letter is from an unrelated document.

Right: Magnificent ceremonies accompanied the despatch and receipt of royal letters. This artist's impression is based on a description in the *Hikayat Misapu* ('Malay Annals').

A record of diplomacy

Whilst there is evidence that Malay letters were being sent much earlier, the earliest surviving letter written in Malay is that sent by Sultan Abu Hayat of Ternate (in present-day Indonesia) to the King of Portugal in 1521. This, like the majority of Malay letters, is an exercise in the art of diplomacy.

The earliest known letter from the Malay Peninsula, written by Sultan Abdul Jalil Riayat Shah of Johor to Louis XV, King of France and Navarre, dates back to 1719. This letter was written in response to a request from the French for trading facilities in Terengganu (which was then a vassal of Johor-Pahang), and informs that permission was granted by the Sultan in return for guns and bullets.

In the course of the 18th and 19th centuries numerous other letters were exchanged between the Malay Sultans and various British captains and governors, providing an important and fascinating insight into the socio-political status of the Malay World at that time. In one such, a particularly long letter from Sultan Mansur of Terengganu to Francis Light in February 1792, the Sultan requested a closer relationship between Terengganu and Penang, and informed Francis Light of Siam's intention to invade Kelantan and Terengganu within the year. It also refers to trade between Terengganu and Penang, and between Terengganu and China. Not long after this the Sultan of Kedah wrote to Francis Light in a letter dated 24 May 1792. In this, the Sultan reconfirmed the receipt of five years' revenue from Francis Light, for the lease of Penang to the East India Company.

Form and elements of the Malay letter

The writing of Malay letters was a serious business. Laboriously written from right to left in Arabic or Jawi script, they were elaborately sealed and sometimes heavily decorated. Such was their complexity that several guides, known as *kitab rasmul*, were produced for the professional scribes who crafted them. The manuscript *Taj al-Salatin* ('The Crown of Kings'), written in 1603, included two such chapters, stating that '*the work of the sword can be carried out by the pen but not vice versa*'.

Each letter opens with a phrase or heading in Arabic, often in intricate calligraphy; the most common phrase being *Qawlah al-haqq* (His Word is the Truth). Another common heading is *Al-mutahaqq* (The Deserving). The language employed throughout the letters is long-winded, in keeping with the Malay trait of taking great lengths to avoid giving offence. Following the heading, the letters continue with a passage highly praising the recipient. For example the Sultan of Johor and Pahang's 1787 letter takes an entire paragraph to express the Sultan's esteem for the intended recipient, 'Seruse Gurnadar' Francis Light, describing his unblemished character and efficiency as governor. The central contents of the letter are then couched in the usual circuitous terms. By way of contrast, letters from European officials to the Malay Sultans did not exhibit such humility and restrained use of language; rather the subject matter of the letter was tackled directly following a brief salutation.

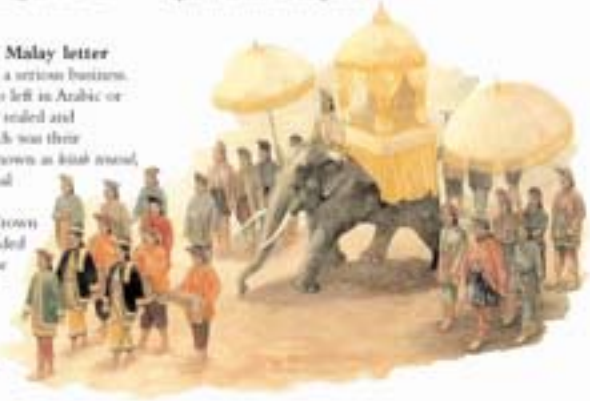
Most of the letters were written on single sheets. For longer letters, sheets were pasted or sewn together to form a long scroll.

Envelopes

The choice of material for the envelopes in which Malay letters were to be conveyed was important, and was—as with the contents of the letters themselves—linked to the relative status of the correspondents. Generally, it appears that letters from one chief to another were wrapped in yellow or white cloth, sometimes silk. If to a prince, the wrapping would usually be royal yellow silk, or if the occasion seemed to demand it, cloth of gold. From inferiors to superiors, the envelope was invariably yellow. Commoners used paper envelopes. The manner in which the envelopes were sealed also varied depending on the status of the correspondents.

Top: Silk envelope and paper wrapper addressed to Raffles, c. 1811.

Right: Cotton envelopes such as this, containing a letter from Datuk Temenggung Abdul Rahman of Johor to Raffles in Bangkok (dated 23 August 1822), were also used in the 19th century.



Golden letters

Royal Malay letters were occasionally illuminated in gold. However, little is known of the theory or practice of this illumination. It is not mentioned in the any of the *kitab rasmul* or other Malay texts, and, despite some fine examples there is no discernible stylistic tradition, although it is likely that Malay artists and illuminators were influenced by letters received by the Malay Sultans from the west Asian states and Europe.

Several of the Peninsular Malay sultanates produced surviving examples, including those of Johor-Pahang-Riau and Terengganu. Others, however, such as Kedah and Perak, are not known to have produced any. From the available evidence it appears that such lavish illumination was determined by the relevant rank of recipient and sender and the purpose of the letter.

A golden letter from the Sultan of Terengganu

This letter from Sultan Ahmad of Terengganu to the Dutch Governor-General in Batavia (Jakarta), Baron van der Capellen, is dated 16 Rajab 1239 (19 March 1824). Now in the collection of the Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin, it is written in ink and gold on paper, with a lampblack seal, and measures 498 by 383 millimetres.

The final paragraphs of the letter are illustrative of the colourful and diplomatic language used by correspondents in such royal letters:

> *'And as for you, General, if it be within your pleasure and willingness, please do not discontinue asking your people to come to Terengganu to trade, buying and selling a little, and if there is anything in this country of Terengganu that you wish to have, you may say so in your letter. We will assist to the best of our ability.*
>
> *There is nothing that we can offer you as a gift as proof of our sincerity, but a long box, a pair of spears, a pair of daggers of considerable width, and a pair of trousers, all of which are of no great value. We can repeat these to a lesser as to trade. The End.*
>
> *This epistle was written in the state of Terengganu on the eighteenth day of the month of Rejab, Friday, seven o'clock in the year 1239.'*

The largest known Malay seal is that of Sultan Ja'afar Mu'azzam Syah of Perak, dating from 1865.

Seals

The most important formal element of the Malay letter, seals (cap, meterai, tera or mohor in Malay) have been in use in the Malay World for over 1,000 years. As elsewhere in the world, they functioned as a symbol of authority, and were used instead of a signature. The seals were often the only part of a letter to give details of the sender. The actual seal matrices (or stamps) that made the seal impressions were made of silver.

The wording on the seals, usually in Arabic, or Malay written in the Jawi script, commonly included the sender's name, title, date and location, as well as an Islamic expression such as 'al-wathiq bi'llah'.

The seal of the Bendahara of Pahang (1865) reads 'di-nadat di-Bukit Ibahanat Syah Alam' (Bendahara Siwa Raja Ibn Bendahara Paduka Raja sanat 1221).

An anonymous carved seal of the Lebaksamo of Pesisir with its imprint the 'wrong' way around.

Red wax seal from 1813 belonging to Tuanku al-Kamil al-Syarif Hussein bin Abdul Rahman acting from Perlang.