

NOTES ON SOME PERSIAN DOCUMENTS FROM EARLY MODERN SOUTHEAST ASIA¹

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Abstract

Using historical documents written in Persian, originating from Melaka, Aceh and Burma, dating from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, this paper analyzes the influence of Persian culture, language and literature in Southeast Asia. It briefly reviews what scholarship to date has revealed of the use of Persian in Southeast Asia according to manuscript and epigraphic evidence, before discussing these Persian documents. The range of dates and places, from Melaka in 1519 to Burma in 1869, via the eighteenth-century Aceh correspondence with Tranquebar and Penang and the evidence for the use of Persian in communications between the VOC and Iran and India, suggests a considerable chronological and geographical spread in the use of Persian in Southeast Asia. Moreover, the language and style of the Melaka and Aceh documents reflect the admixing of local elements into the Persian. It has been found that Persian was not restricted to the realm of Sufism and literature, but also served in at least some times and places in Southeast Asia as a lingua franca.

Introduction

The influence of Persian culture, language and literature in Southeast Asia has been widely recognised in scholarship.¹ Sailors and merchants from Iran are thought to have been present in the region from pre-Islamic times, and by the seventeenth century the Iranian diaspora played a highly influential role at the court of Ayutthaya, while Persian influences were also marked at the Islamicised court of Arakan.² Elsewhere in Southeast Asia, evidence of the presence of Iranian migrants is rather slighter, although the archives of Armenian merchants from Julfa who were active in the region reveal a trading network that by the seventeenth century bound Southeast Asia not just to Iran but also to Europe.³ Perhaps the most striking evidence of this Persian influence comes in the legends of the Muslim Cham people of modern Vietnam, who claim their origins are connected to Nusirvan, the Sasanian king Anushirwan.⁴ Claims of Iranian descent were perhaps less important for the legitimacy of Malay courts than an association with Rum, but nonetheless exist; in the Malay Annals, the ancestor of the prestigious Melaka line of sultans, Raja Syulan, is also said to be a descendant of Anushirwan, the son of the Emperor (syahriar) Kobad (i.e. Qubad), ‘the king of east and west’, in other words the entire world.⁵ Persian influence is clear in Malay literature, of which some of the earliest works are claimed to be translations from Persian originals, such as the *Hikayat Bayan Budiman* and the *Hikayat Muhammad Hanafiyah*, even if the putative originals can rarely be traced with any certainty.⁶ Other works, such as the famous Malay book of advice literature probably composed in seventeenth century Aceh, the *Taj al-Salatin* of Bukhari al-Jauhari (or Johori), are thought to have been compiled by Persian-speaking immigrants (in this case probably from Central Asia) to the Malay world drawing on Persian sources.⁷ Meanwhile, elements derived from the great Persian epic, the *Shahnama*, can be

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found in works of Malay historiography such as the history of Kedah, the *Hikayat Merong Mahanwangsa*.⁸ The lexical influence of Persian can also be observed in loanwords in both Thai and Malay. For instance, common Malay terms such as *syah* and *dewan* are borrowings from Persian.⁹ Nonetheless, the number of such loanwords – perhaps some 300 in total in Malay – is rather limited, and certainly secondary to Arabic and Sanskrit.

Despite these widespread Persian influences, libraries in Southeast Asia or containing collections originating from the region scarcely reveal any manuscripts in Persian that can be shown to have been composed or circulated there. Whereas Arabic is widely represented (primarily, but not exclusively, as a religious language), the absence of Persian texts is striking given the cosmopolitan and multilingual environment of early modern Southeast Asia, and raises the question of the means of transmission of Persian culture and language to the region. However, while there is little firsthand manuscript evidence of the circulation of Persian literary texts in Southeast Asia, recent research has brought to light a handful of documents, dating from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, originating from Melaka, Aceh and Burma, written in Persian, which shed a certain light on the diffusion of the language in the region. In this paper, therefore, I shall firstly briefly review what scholarship to date has revealed of the use of Persian in Southeast Asia according to manuscript and epigraphic evidence, before discussing these Persian documents. I shall largely leave aside, for the purposes of this essay, the case of Arakan on the frontiers of South and Southeast Asia, which had a much closer relationship with Bengal and India than the regions under consideration here.

Persian in Southeast Asian Epigraphy and Manuscripts

The earliest securely dated evidence for Persian in Southeast Asia is epigraphic and comes from North Sumatra. Most famous, no doubt, is the gravestone of Na'ina Husam al-Din b. Na'ina Amin at Candi Uleeblang, dated 823 Hijriyyah/1420, which is inscribed with Persian verses from the *Tayyibat* of Sa'di. However, the gravestone was certainly produced in the Gujarati city of Cambay, which did a flourishing trade in exporting its marble carvings across the Indian Ocean. Cambay graves were widely popular among the elite of the North Sumatran Sultanate of Pasai, but it is far from clear to what extent the inscriptional programme was specified by the patrons.¹⁰ It may reflect the taste of the Gujarati craftsmen or their models rather than being secure evidence for the appreciation of Sa'di's works in Sumatra. We are on firmer ground, however, with a grave dated 844 Hijriyyah/1440 from Teungku Sareh in Aceh which gives the date in mixed Persian and Arabic: '*Aṭā' allāh b. Ismā'īl Shāh dushanba... māh-i rabī' al-awwal sanat 844*', suggesting that 'Ata Allah ibn Isma'il Shah or the persons who ordered his grave and/or composed his epitaph were Persian speakers,' in the words of Elizabeth Lambourn.¹¹ According to Lambourn's research, this type of tombstone seems to have been of local manufacture. It is noteworthy that despite its greater distance from the Persophone heartlands of India and Iran, this Sumatran epigraphic evidence seems to predate that from Arakan, represented by a bilingual Persian-Arakanese inscription dated 900 Hijriyyah/1495, while Persian phrases appear on Arakan's idiosyncratic Arabic coinage around 1481-91.¹²

Returning to the archipelagic world, quotations in Persian can also be found in early Malay works. The poems of Hamza Fansuri, the celebrated Malay-language Sufi poet, whose dates are disputed but was probably active in the sixteenth century, quotes in Persian verse and prose from Fakhr al-Din Iraqī's *Lama'at*, Shaykh Muhammad Maghribi, Jami's *Lawa'ih*, Sa'di, Ghazzali's *Kimiya-yi Sa'adat*, 'Attar, Shah Ni'matallah, and Shams-i Tabrizi. His works also contain quotations in Malay translation from other famous Persian Sufi works such as Shabistari's *Gulshan-i Raz* and Rumi's *Mathnawi*.¹³ This attests to a considerable

knowledge of the classics of Persian Sufism on Hamza's part. Hamza had travelled widely, including to Arabia, Baghdad and India, so he may be an atypical case, but these quotations seem to presuppose a reasonable knowledge of Persian among his Malay-speaking audience. Beyond the Sufi context, Persian quotations are also found in an early Malay manual of *terasul*, correspondence.¹⁴ We also have two Southeast Asian manuscripts that are largely in Persian. The first of these, dated 990 Hijriyyah/1582, is Persian grammar of Arabic entitled *Khulasat fi 'ilm al-Sarf*, which is furnished with an interlinear Malay translation. The manuscript, today held in Leiden University library as MS. Cod. Or. 1666, evidently originates from Java, being written on *daluwang* (beaten tree bark), and seems likely to have been compiled for the sultan of the northwest Javanese state of Banten.¹⁵ The second, also held in Leiden University Library, MS. Cod. Or. 7056, probably originates from Aceh and dates to the seventeenth century. It contains excerpts from the works of Jalal al-Din Rumi with an interlinear Malay translation.¹⁶ The latest example of the use of Persian in a Malay manuscript that has come to my notice is part of the colophon of an early manuscript of Bukhari Johari's *Taj al-Salatin*, copied in Penang in 1824, where the date is given as *bi-māh-i dhū'l-ḥajj* [sic] *bi-tārīkh-i chahārum sana-yi hijrī 1229*.¹⁷

The combined evidence of epigraphy and manuscripts thus suggests a knowledge of Persian existed in North Sumatra as early as the fifteenth century, spreading to Java by the sixteenth. Persian was especially associated with Sufism, although the *daluwang* manuscript composed in northwest Java may indicate a much more widespread interest in the language for practical purposes. Nonetheless, given that in both the case of the *daluwang* manuscript and the Rumi anthology, the Persian text was furnished with an interlinear Malay translation, it seems knowledge of Persian was regarded as somewhat recondite and certainly could not be taken for granted. The situation thus contrasts with that for Arabic in the region. While on occasion Arabic works copied in Southeast Asia are indeed provided with interlinear translations in Malay or Javanese, this is far from universally the case, and there were also numerous original works in Arabic that were composed in the region.¹⁸

Let us now turn to the Persian documents from Southeast Asia, which have not previously received much attention in scholarship. Their importance lies in the fact that they attest the active use of Persian in the region as a lingua franca. The earliest, a letter written in Melaka in 1519 to the Portuguese king, has been previously published by Jorge Dos Santos Alves and Nader Nasiri-Moghaddam.¹⁹ The remaining four documents, three from Aceh and one from Burma, have not previously attracted the attention of scholarship. In this paper, owing to the limitations of space, I concentrate on discussing some of the main the linguistic and stylistic features of the letters with a view to shedding light on the circumstances of their composition and thus the uses of Persian in the region. Full transcription and translation of these documents must await another occasion. I also draw attention to the translations of Persian correspondence in the VOC archives in Jakarta as further evidence for the use of Persian in Southeast Asia.

The 1519 letter from Melaka

This letter (Figure 1), dated 2 Muharram 925 Hijriyyah/5 January 1519, is preserved in Torre do Tombo archive in Lisbon, with the catalogue number *Cartas orientais* 33. This is not the place to investigate the valuable historical information that the letter contains describing the early years of Portuguese rule in Melaka. A full (if in places debatable) translation into French has been presented by Alves and Nasiri-Moghaddam, who have also examined the context of the letter, which they claim to be perhaps the first 'personal letter' surviving to have been written in the Malay world.²⁰ They have also noted certain similarities to another letter that has come down to us, written by a former servant of Sultan Kalu Muhammad of the

Maldives by name of Baba ‘Abdallah of Hurmuz. Whoever he was, the author, according to his own account, had accompanied Albuquerque from Goa to Melaka, and the letter describes in some detail the establishment of the Portuguese there. From the contents of his letter, Alves and Nasiri-Moghaddam have suggested the author originated from the Middle East and was probably a Jew or a Christian, not a Muslim, given the names of his two sons which he mentions at the end of the letter, Kashpar (Gaspar?) and Puli (Paulo?). They have tentatively identified him with a Khoja ‘Izz al-Din, a Jew mentioned in the Portuguese sources as involved in the financial administration of Melaka. At any rate, we know for sure from the letter that its author was in charge of the mint (*ṣarrāfkhāna*) in Melaka under the Portuguese.

The description of the letter as a personal letter is however somewhat misleading. The question of the recipient is not broached by Alves and Nasiri-Moghaddam and is difficult to resolve fully given the destruction of most of the opening lines of the text. However, it is clear that the document would in fact be better described as a petition rather than a personal letter, as indicated by the first words (*‘arṣa dāsht*). It is intended to solicit the favour of the recipient upon the author and his sons by describing his role in Portuguese Melaka, and justifying his actions, having been (according to his account) unjustly imprisoned by the Portuguese factor Lopo Vas who had also confiscated 300 *ashrafi* coins from him. As the author describes:

I waited for the *capitam mor* [i.e. the Portuguese Governor-General] to come. The *capitam mor*, Dom Alessio de Meneses, came and I presented my evidence and demanded he judge [my case] He reply, “Write to Cochin so that they hear your case.” No one gave me justice.²¹

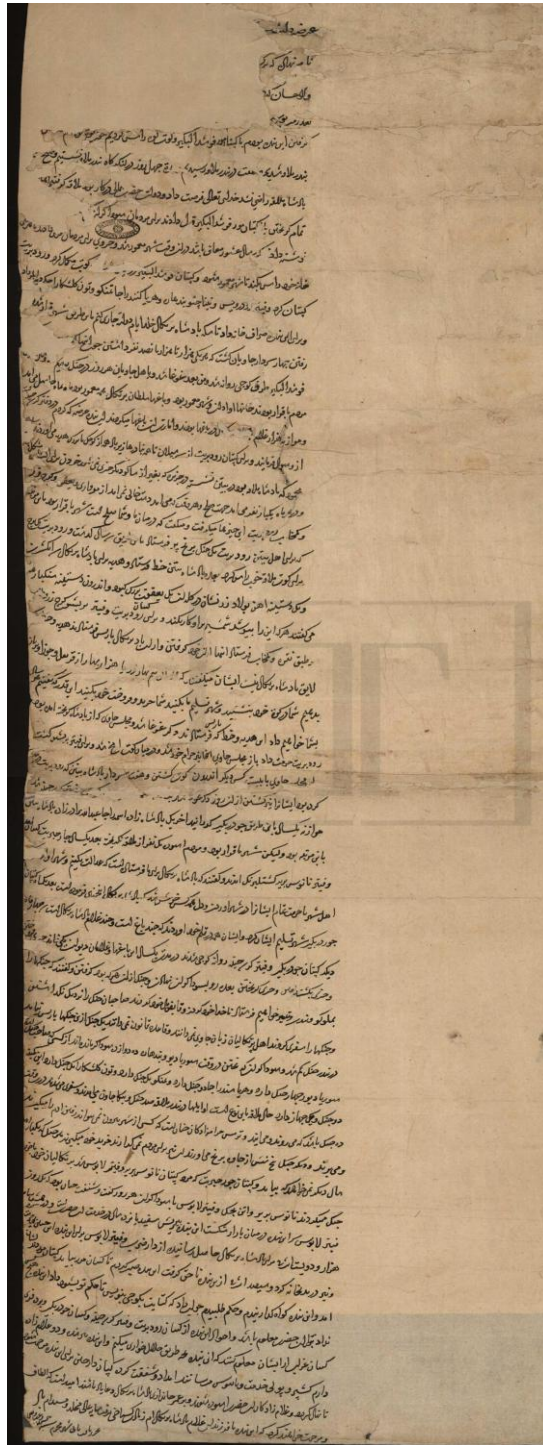


Figure 1: Torre do Tombo archive, Lisbon, Cartas orientais 33.
The 1519 letter from Melaka

The author concludes the letter by insisting on the lawfulness of his conduct, requesting the grant of the cinnamon monopoly,²² and by expressing the hope that his sons will pray for the long life of the king of Portugal (*bar 'umr-i jāndāzi²³-yi pādshāh-i Purtūgāl du 'ā yād bāshand umīd-ast*). It seems most likely that the addressee is in fact intended to be the king, or else a senior Portuguese official close to the court. The addressee's help is implicitly required in exonerating the author and restoring his confiscated wealth.

The Persian reflects the influence of both colloquialism and Malay. Colloquial abbreviations such *rās* for *rāst* and the omission of the direct object *-rā* are common. In addition to Malay terms such as *bendahara* and *temenggung*, Malay words are used in the text. The Malay word *kota* ‘fort’ is used in several instances (l. 5, 27, 30), including to describe Goa, a location outside Southeast Asia. All these features are illustrated in line 5: *kota Guwa [-rā] rās kardīm*. The author rather dismissively refers to the Portuguese’s ignorance of Malay and local customs (l. 40, *ahl-i Purtūgālīān zabān-i jāwī namīdānand wa qā‘ida-yi qānūn namīdānand*), and it is possible that he also served as some kind of intermediary between Portuguese and Malays, given his knowledge of the local language to at least some degree.

Correspondence in Persian and Arabic addressed to the Portuguese king is attested elsewhere in this period, above all from the Gulf, India and Africa.²⁴ Most of these are written in the name of the local Muslim rulers. The Melaka letter, however, is unusual in that it represents the use of Persian within the Estado da India as a lingua franca allowing the Portuguese’s Asian subjects to communicate with their new masters, given the lack of ability at local languages on the Portuguese part, as alluded to by the author. The relatively simple colloquial style (notwithstanding some occasionally obscure phrases) mixing Malayisms and Persian doubtless reflects the everyday use of Persian in the Indian Ocean world, and is comparable with an Arabic document from Pasai composed in the same period which also exhibits many colloquial and local features.²⁵

To what extent, however, Melaka was already a part of what has been termed the ‘Persianate cosmopolis’ – the Persian-speaking world that incorporated India, Central Asia and Iran²⁶ - or was brought into it as a result of Albuquerque’s incorporation of Melaka into the Goa-based Estado da India is uncertain. One hint in a local legend related by Tomé Pires suggests a connection between North Sumatra, the site of the earliest attestations of Persian in Southeast Asia, and Melaka which may be significant for our purposes. Writing in Melaka in 1515, the Portuguese apothecary relates how in the early fifteenth century ‘some rich Moorish merchants moved from Pase [Pasai] to Melaka, Parsees, as well as Bengalees and Arabian Moors, for at that time there were a large number of merchants belonging to these three nations, and they were very rich, and they had settled there from the said parts, carrying on their trade.’²⁷ These merchants were encouraged by ‘Xarquem Darxa’, as Pires calls him, a corruption of Iskandar Syah (d. 1424), the second Malay prince of Melaka who married a princess from Pasai and embraced Islam. According to Pires, when the Portuguese reached Melaka at the beginning of the sixteenth century, they found a community of more than four thousand foreign merchants, including Gujaratis, and what he describes as ‘Parsees, Bengalees and Arabs’.²⁸ Tome Pires also refers to the multilingual environment in Melaka, where eighty-four different languages could be heard.²⁹ This suggests that the Persian presence in Melaka, and the use of Persian as a lingua franca there, probably predated the Portuguese presence, and most likely the use of Malayisms such as *kota* by our author suggests less a malapropism than unique evidence for the colloquial Persian of Melaka.

The Aceh letters

Two Persian letters from the reign of Sultan Alauddin Ahmad Syah (r. 1725-1735) survive in the Danish National Archive, both addressed to the Danish Asiatic Company in their outpost of the Indian port of Tranquebar.³⁰ One further Persian letter from the late eighteenth century exists in the Light collection of letters, held at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London.

The first (Figure 2), MS AS.Komp2188a.DD, survives intact. The letter deals with the tax exemptions enjoyed by Danish merchants, and refers to previous correspondence with the

Danish East India Company regarding this. The document discussed in particular exemptions for cloth (*qumāsh*) imports. The language is generally fairly simple and businesslike, with occasional flowery touches. The opening compliments are concise: *maḥabbat u mawaddat-panāh shafqat u marhamat-i dastgāh-i mu‘amadī az jānib-i ḥaḍrat-i pādshāh-i dār-i salām zill allāh ta‘ālī fi al-‘ālam kih kumpanī-yi Dānik Mār-k-rā ma‘lūm būda bāshad*. This probably reflects the influence of Middle Eastern diplomatics, for in the Malay tradition the recipient would usually be given more elaborate compliments than the sender. Elsewhere, the letter refers to the mutual affection between the two sides: ‘love which we and you have in our hearts, the like of which cannot be expressed’, which seems more in keeping with Malay tradition of expressing sincerity and affection. The position of the seal at the top right is the main indicator of the sender’s superior status, in keeping with Malay conventions.³¹

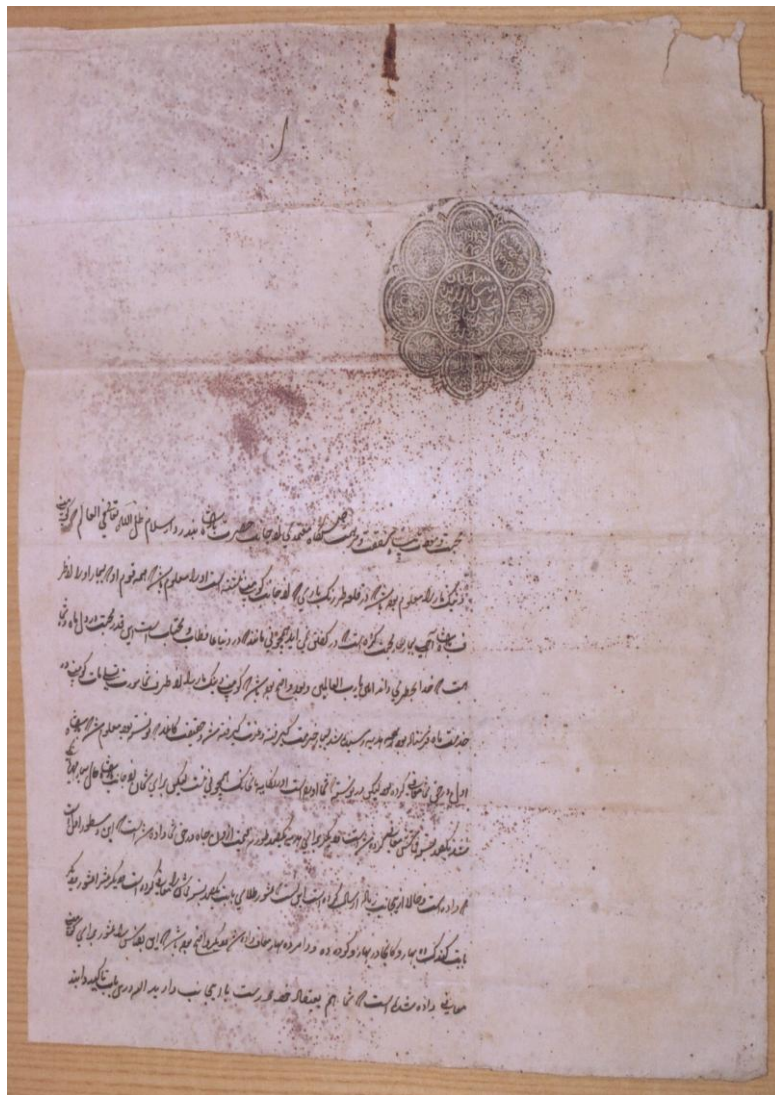


Figure 2: Danish National Archive, Copenhagen MS AS.Komp2188a.DD
(photo courtesy of Annabel Teh Gallop)

In short, then, the formal aspects of the letter indicate a mixture of Malay and Middle Eastern epistolographic traditions. A similarly mongrel nature is suggested by the language of the text. The letter is noteworthy for the numerous spelling mistakes made in even (or in fact

especially) the most basic words. Lines 3-4 contain a particularly severe example, *‘āftāb u mihtāb ... dar dil-i māh u shumāh* for *āftāb u mihtāb... mā u shumā*. The misspelling of *mā* ‘we’ as *māh* ‘moon’ also occurs at the beginning of line 5. Other words with are misspelled are *girifta* ‘taken’, written here twice as *girifta*, and *taslīmāt*, ‘receipts’, which is split into two words *taslī māt*. The nature of these mistakes is perplexing. Aside from the spelling, the language of the letter, while not elegant, is tolerably coherent; certainly it was not composed by someone who did not know how to spell the common Persian word for ‘we’. The most likely explanation for the misspellings seems to be that it was dictated to a scribe with a shaky or non-existent grasp of the language. Furthermore, the mistakes perhaps indicate that the scribe was accustomed to copying Persian documents he did not understand, and confused the words. The spelling *‘āftāb* (عافطاب) for *āftāb* (أفتاب) might suggest he had seen words involving the root *‘āf* (forgiveness) which he confused, while similarly he had probably met *māh* in other contexts and failed to distinguish it from *mā*. Nonetheless, the script of the letter is a *nasta‘liq*, the script typically used in India and Iran in this period, and rather dissimilar to contemporary styles of writing Arabic script in Southeast Asia.

Our second Persian document (Figure 3) from the Danish archives is unfortunately very imperfectly preserved, although we have both Alauddin Ahmad Syah’s seal, and at the end, a date: Shawwal 1146 Hijriyyah/March 1734. MS AS.Komp2188a.QQ is missing the entire left half, but enough survives to show it must have been of a very different character. In contrast to the simple greetings of the previous letter, it starts *īn nibishta ast az takht-i muraṣṣa* ‘this is a letter from jewel-studded throne’. The missing parts presumably continued in a similarly elaborate vein, for the second line starts with such adjectives. Line 5 refers to the English East India Company who are ‘the ancient friends’ of Aceh (*kumpanī-yi angrīz kih ham yakī az dūst-i qadīm-i takht*). The document seems to deal with the trade privileges allotted to the Danish Company, and mentions a firman that has been previously issued. However, not enough of the document survives to judge its contents with greater certainty, and indeed the nature of the document itself is somewhat unclear. It refers to itself as a *nibishta*, literally a ‘writing’, and the differences in style from MS AS.Komp2188a.QQ raise the possibility that rather than being a letter it is actually some sort of firman or royal decree. However, this letter also differs linguistically from the first document, its surviving portions not exhibiting the infringements of the conventions of Persian spelling seen in the first letter.



**Figure 3: Danish National Archive, Copenhagen. MS AS.Komp2188a.QQ
(photo courtesy of Annabel Teh Gallop).**

Our third letter comes not from the court, but a private individual, Teuku Muda Muhammad Saat of Teluk Semawi (Lhokseumawe, in northeastern Aceh, near the old centre of Pasai, perhaps significantly).³² It is addressed to Francis Light (1740-1794), best known as the founder of Penang, and his business partner Captain James Scott, and concerns an intermediary, Shaykh Nasir, who is involved in selling betel, and although undated must have been composed in approximately the 1780s or 1790s. It is interesting to note that even though

composed by an otherwise unattested merchant, not a royal court, and destined for a recipient within Southeast Asia, Persian is chosen as the medium. It is also noteworthy that in fact this private letter is composed in a considerably more fluent and comprehensible Persian than the first Aceh letter discussed above. The reason for the choice of language requires further consideration, in particular taking account of its relationship to the other letters (around five) by Muhammad Saat in the *Light* collection. It is possible that the choice of Persian in this instance was determined by Light's association with the East India Company, where Persian was widely used for administrative purposes.

The variations between the language and style of the three Aceh letters point to the difficulties of generalizing. It seems that, at any rate, as the first letter indicates, individuals with a range of linguistic abilities in Persian were involved in their composition, and there was certainly some sort of oral component. The spelling mistakes cannot be explained by textual transmission, but rather speak of a scribe with a limited to non-existent knowledge of Persian. Nonetheless, together the three letters indicate the use in Aceh of Persian as a language for communicating with foreign merchants, something for which we know Arabic too was employed on occasion.³³ In other words, the letters confirm the practical use of Persian beyond the realms of Sufism (indicated by the manuscript evidence discussed above) in this period, and the letter from Lhokseumawe suggests a much wider diffusion of knowledge of the language than courtly circles. Doubtless the importance to Aceh of trade links with India, where Persian enjoyed a status both as the official language of many courts and as a *lingua franca*, was one factor in spreading knowledge of Persian. Like Arabic correspondence from Southeast Asia, the Persian documents from Aceh indicate the mixing of both Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian diplomatic conventions, although the Lhokseumawe letter seems, perhaps surprisingly, less idiosyncratic than documents issued by the court.³⁴

The Burmese correspondence of 1869

The cosmopolitan court of Arakan on the western coastal periphery of Burma is known to have had a Persian chancery, from which a handful of documents have survived, including two apparently original copies dating to the seventeenth century.³⁵ However, it is interesting to learn that the use of Persian also extended further east into Burma. The Prime Ministry Ottoman archives in Istanbul preserves the final piece of Persian correspondence to be considered here, a letter from the Prime Minister of King Mindon of Ava, dated 1869 (Figure 4), catalogued as HR.TO.453/37/20(3). The Persian text is accompanied by a Burmese and English versions; the Burmese was doubtless the original.³⁶ The letter was sent at King Mindon's request in response to previous attempts by the Ottomans to contact the Burmese. Two previous Ottoman ambassadors are mentioned, a certain Hajji Sayyid Hasan Ta Sin Dinbashi (probably a corruption of Tahsin Binbashi) who came in 1855 saying "I am from the Sultan of Rum", and turned up again in 1859 explaining that the Burmese response with which he had been entrusted had been lost in a shipwreck. A second Turkish emissary named Hajji Ali Ghazi Rumi turned up in 1869, bearing a letter from the Ottoman sultan (*ma'ahu khaṭṭ az ṭaraf-i sultān-i rūm*). After this letter was translated into Burmese the truth of the previous embassy was understood. The surviving letter represents a response to Hajji Ali Ghazi Rumi's letter, and expresses the desire of King Mindon for friendly relations. The letters are of interest as otherwise relations between Burma and the Ottomans are unattested. However, for the purposes of this paper I will focus on the linguistic and stylistic features.

خوة فی مروة فی حقیقت فی المحی صدر اعظم زاده ^{حسنة} بورد علیک رحمة الله وبرکاته از طرف سلطان او اعانت و محبت
 و خوة و لقب یافته وزیر اعظم الملقب منزه و منجی امپراطور نیز مؤلف با گمان زانیکه بطرف صدر اعظم از
 طرف لقب یافته وزیر اعظم منزه و امپراطور نیز و ارقام نحوه مستوفی سلطان او اصحاب خلیل سفید بر
 آسمان سلطان مشرق خوة دینا و دولت دینا بر دنیا مایان یعنی بشنید او احشمة و دولت به آرزو
 و اصف هست که مع سلطان روم احشمة و دولت علیه دوسته و محبت نمایند در نیر میان سینه بیکر اردو
 باغچه بر شخصی حاجی سید حسن تاسن دن باشی نامی از طرف روم بلکه او او روم گردید میگوید من از
 طرف سلطان روم آمدم بلکه نوکرام شخس آن اعتبار نحوه خطی ارقام نحوه بجای مذکور روز نحوه بودم
 در سینه بیکر اردو و صد نوزدهم بره بعد مدت میدید آن شخصی سینه بیکر اردو و صد سبب یکم باز پس آمد
 حقیقت آن بر سینه شد حاجی مذکور جواب داد که چهار رسوا بودم بسبب طوفان خراب شد و خطیم
 گم نشد لب باین سبب و این آدم دیگر با خطی نوشته دلم فرستادم بودم و برای جواب منظمم و جواب سینه
 وزیر حاجی مذکور آمد درین حین باز بیکر اردو و صد سبب یکم سینه ما تا بیکر اردو شخصی حاجی علی غازی رومی
 مو خط از طرف سلطان روم درین دیار او او روم گردید و خط به بدت دلم بعد آن ترجمه زبان بره
 کرده شد و دیگر حقیقتنا زبان بر سینه شد و از بلذ آن معلوم شد که سلطان روم با سلطان مایان ارف
 دوسته است و از زبان حاجی مذکور دریافت شد که حاجی مذکور از طرف سلطان سردار است هرگز است
 و میگوید که من مرسل از طرف سلطان روم قسم و اقرار دلم فرستادم آن اعتبار که حاجی علی
 غازی رو با سلطان مایان ملاقات نحوه عرض که شد و سلطان مایان بعد دریافت حکم صادر شد
 که مو وزیران خود را نیز طرف حاجی مذکور رو روانه نحوه و وزیران مذکورها یکی سازن بدین آون ما ملله
 چون و دیگر لقب آن سازن نایم بعدن سینه و معلوم لقب آن بیاد ائیک سازن بعدن یاز و چهارم بنیاسین
 نایم سینه نایم و بنجم و کنگ لقب آن سینه گوئنگ نیات مویش آن حاجی علی غازی بطرف روم روز
 شد امید آنکه بعد رسیدن این آن محبت با سلطان روم ملاقات نحوه و در میان سلطان روم و سلطان او ابر طو روم
 نایم محبت کنان شد و بعد اگر از طرف سلطان روم ایلمی آمد مایان از او در تقطیع استقبال نایم و اگر از طرف خط خط
 مو ایلمی آمدن اصف هست خط نوشته فرستادم و دیگر اینکه سرداران از نیر فرستادند که هر جا که میر میکنند ملحق شوند
 بناح ۳ سه محرم ۱۲۹۶
 سلم برمی

Figure 4. Prime Ministry Ottoman Archive, Istanbul, HR.TO.453/37/20 (3)

It is interesting to note that the opening of the letter is in fact in Turkish rather than Persian: *gürretli mürrüvetli haķikatli şadr-i a'zam zāda allāh ĥubbahu wa-ħaşmatahu*. The use of these greetings with the characteristic Turkish *-li* adjectival ending to describe the vizier is evidence that author of the Persian text was acquainted with at least some of the

conventions of Ottoman epistolography. Most likely this was through the letters brought by the previous, somewhat mysterious, Ottoman envoys to Burma, although one might expect the adjective form-*li* in a written document. The use of *-li*, the spoken form, may indicate oral transmission of these greetings. The strategy of using Turkish greetings in a letter otherwise written in another language is not unique and can also be observed in contemporary Acehese documents written in Arabic but addressed to the Sublime Porte.³⁷

It is important to note that the Persian text contains several differences on points of detail with the English (and thus presumably the Burmese text, of which the English seems to be an accurate translation). The first Ottoman to Burma is called in the Burmese and English versions Haji Sayed Hasan Ta Sin Byin Bashi and Hadjee Seyed Hassen Tassen Byen Basha respectively, the latter representing a nineteenth-century Romanisation of the Burmese.³⁸ However, in the Persian, the last component of his name is given clearly (if doubtless incorrectly) as Din Bashi – and the *kasra* of Din is even vocalised. This discrepancy between the Persian and English versions suggests it was dictated to a Persian-speaking scribe who misheard the name and did not understand the Ottoman title (Binbashi meaning major, the military rank). In the Persian text Hajji ‘Ali Ghazi is given the epithet Rumi, which does not appear in the English. In the Persian, the Burmese ruler is consistently referred to as the *sulṭān-i Awā*, the sultan of Ava, which does not appear at all in the English version. The English version refers to various proofs which Hajji ‘Ali Ghazi brought to convince the court of the truth of his mission: he ‘produced a number of documents, red Turkish flag, marked white crescent of moon and star on it; and a bead said to indicate a firm establishment of oath, pledged in the presence of H.M. the Sultan.’ None of this appears in the Persian, but rather references is made to Hajji ‘Ali’s oral testimony (*ḥaqīqatan zabānī pursīda shud wa az zabānī-yi ān ma‘lūm shud*). The significance of these alterations and omissions is less clear. Did the Persian scribe – most likely an Indian employed at the court – deliberately simplify what he thought was irrelevant to his audience, or did he take liberties with a text – probably dictated – which he did not fully understand? At any rate, his addition of the Ottoman greetings and the epithet Rumi to Hajji ‘Ali’s name suggest the ways in which he felt free to add information of his own, and he evidently had access to original Turkish documents sent from Istanbul (although whether really sent by the Ottoman sultan is another question), the compliments of which he sought to emulate.

The Persian document thus reflects what a study of mid-nineteenth century Acehese correspondence to Istanbul that exists in Malay and Arabic versions has also emphasised.³⁹ The letters purporting to offer the same text in different languages are in fact distinct versions, not precise translations, differing in content and emphases. Only the gist remains the same. In part this may reflect the importance of orality as a means of transmitting instructions to the scribe, but it also reflects a deliberate adaptation of the contents and style according to what is appropriate for each language.

The lost Persian letters of the VOC archives

A further impression of the use of Persian in Southeast Asia can be obtained from the correspondence of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) now held in the Arsip Nasional Republik Indonesia (ANRI) in Jakarta. Regrettably the VOC archivists almost invariably discarded the original document, preserving only the Dutch translation which was inserted into the record of incoming and outgoing diplomatic correspondence, the *Daghregister*. Nonetheless, the translated documents do give some indication of the circumstances under which Persian was used. The following letters, now digitized by ANRI and made available on their website,⁴⁰ were originally written in Persian and sent to the VOC headquarters in Batavia:

1. Archive File 3572, fol. 443-445, from Bandar Abbas to Batavia, inserted in the *Daghregister* 24 November 1761.
2. Archive File 3573, fol. 75-76, from Bandar Abbas to Batavia, inserted 1 March 1763.
3. Archive File 3573, fol. 76-79, from Muhammad Ja'far Khan of Bandar Abbas, inserted 1 March 1763.
4. Archive File 3573, fol. 298-301, from Muhammad Ja'far Khan, dispatched from Bandar Abbas, dated 16 October 1764, inserted 5 Jan 1765.
5. Archive File 3573, fol. 301. From officials in Kochi. Inserted 8 Jan 1765.
6. Archive File 3573, fol. 302-3, from Abdullah Muhammad of Bandar Abbas, inserted 8 January 1765.
7. Archive File 3573, fol. 472-475, from Bandar Abbas, inserted 20 October 1766.
8. Archive File 3573, fol. 533-536, from Abi Abdullah of Bandar Abbas, inserted 9 November 1766.
9. Archive File 3573, fol. 536-539, from Fatahydar of Kochi, inserted 12 November 1766.
10. Archive File 3573, fol. 536-540, from Linga Sili of Pulicat, inserted 17 November 1766.
11. Archive File 3573, fol. 590-591, from Mir Hafiz ud-Din Ahmad Khan of Surat, inserted 13 July 1767.
12. Archive File 3574, fol. 384-386, from Ali Raja of Kolthunadu, dated 21 April 1770, inserted 27 October 1770.
13. Archive File 3574, fol. 484-488, from Ashraf 'Ali Khan, ruler of Murshidabad, inserted 9 May 1771.
14. Archive File 3574, fol. 488-492, from Ashraf Ali Khan of Murshidabad, inserted 9 May, 1771.
15. Archive File 3574, fol. 495-497, from Ali Raja of Kolathunadu, dated 11 March 1771, inserted 17 June 1771.
16. Archive File 3574, fol. 513-7 from Ashraf 'Ali Khan, ruler of Murshidabad. Dated 1 April 1771, inserted 16 July 1771.

Seven letters, nearly half of the total, are from Bandar Abbas on the Gulf coast of Iran; the remainder are from India, either Murshidabad in Bengal, or South India (Kolthunadu, Pulicut and Kochi), with only one letter from the major emporium of Surat specified as being in Persian. Clearly, sixteen documents represents only a tiny fraction of the 8563 diplomatic letters contained in the VOC files dating between 1625 and 1812.⁴¹ Nonetheless, it should be emphasized that these are only the letters where the original language is actually specified as being Persian. Looking more broadly at letters from the Safavids to the VOC, for instance, we can see there a further eleven letters dating between 1644 and 1714 sent from Isfahan to Batavia, mainly by Shah Sulayman I and Sultan Husayn, which were almost certainly in Persian although this is not specified in the surviving translation.⁴² Doubtless this is also the case for the extensive correspondence with Indian rulers, although we know on occasion these also sent letters in other Indian vernaculars: we have a letter translated from a Malayalam original sent from Kochi to Batavia in 1771.⁴³ At any rate, it is clear that correspondents from both India and Iran could send letters in Persian to Batavia in reasonable confidence they would be understood. To what extent Persian was used in return outward correspondence from Batavia needs further investigation.

Conclusion

The documents investigated here are unquestionably the tip of the iceberg; how much, however, of that iceberg has now melted will doubtless never be known, but the range of dates and places, from Melaka in 1519 to Burma in 1869, via the eighteenth century Aceh

correspondence with Tranquebar and Penang and the evidence for the use of Persian in communications between the VOC and Iran and India, suggests a considerable chronological and geographical spread in the use of Persian in Southeast Asia. Moreover, the language and style of the Melaka and Aceh documents reflect the admixing of local elements into the Persian. These are not simply documents that happen to be composed in Southeast Asia by Persian-speakers, but products of local officials and chanceries that used Persian as a medium to communicate with the world to their west. Persian, then, was not restricted to the realm of Sufism and literature, but served in at least some times and places in Southeast Asia as a *lingua franca*. Both the Melaka and Aceh documents suggest a better grasp of spoken than written Persian on the part of their authors or scribes. It seems likely, as the Aceh documents suggest, that Persian was especially important for communications between India and Southeast Asia. There is thus every chance that further research in hitherto untapped archives will bring to light new examples of the use of Persian in Southeast Asia. For the moment, we can note simply that Persian should be considered alongside Malay and Arabic as one of the languages of diplomatic correspondence employed in the region during the early modern era, and that it was used in Muslim, Christian and Buddhist states. This suggests that the truly supranational character of Persian endured as long as late as the nineteenth century, and suggests that notions of a Persian ‘cosmopolis’ as propounded by some recent scholarship should also take account of non-Muslim regions where Persian language and culture may have been influential. The existence of a Burmese-language manuscript traditional history of Iran suggests that the Persian letter described here may not have been entirely divorced from a broader context of cultural penetration from the Persianate world.⁴⁴ Doubtless if the Ayutthaya archives had survived, further evidence of the use of Persian in Buddhist Southeast Asia would come to light.

Notes

¹ A useful survey is M. Ismail Marcinkowski, "Persian Presence in Southeast Asia", in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. Available at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/southeast-asia-i>.

² For Ayutthaya see M. Ismail Marcinkowski, *From Isfahan to Ayutthaya: Contacts Between Iran and Siam in the 17th Century*, Singapore: Pustaka Nasional, 2005; for the multilingual and multicultural environment of Arakan see Jacques P. Leider, "These Buddhist Kings with Muslim Names: A Discussion on the Muslim Influence in the Mrauk-U Period", in *Études birmanes en hommage à Denise Bernot*, edited by Pierre Pichard and François, Paris: École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1998, pp. 186–96.

³ Sebouh Aslanian, *From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean: The Global Trade Networks of Armenian Merchants from New Julfa*, Berkeley: University of California, 2011.

⁴ See the discussion in Philipp Bruckmayr, "Persian kings, Arab conquerors, and Malay Islam: Comparative perspectives on the place of Muslim epics in the Islamisation of the Chams", in *Islamisation: Comparative Perspectives from History*, edited by A.C.S. Peacock, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017, pp. 472-494.

⁵ Tun Seri Lanang, *Sulalat al-Salatin ya'ni Perteturan Segala Raja-Raja (Sejarah Melayu)*, edited by Muhammad Haji Salleh, Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 2009, p. 11: "Raja Syulan itu daripada anak cucu Raja Nusyirwan 'adil, anak Raja Kobad Syahriar, raja masyrik maghrib".

⁶ Claude Guillot, "La Perse et le monde malais. Échanges commerciaux et intellectuelles", *Archipel* 68, 2004, pp. 159-192; Tomáš Petrů, "'Lands below the Winds' as part of the Persian cosmopolis", *Moussons* 27, 2016, pp. 147-161.

⁷ V.I. Braginsky, "Tajus Salatin ('The Crown of Sultans') of Bukhari al-Jauhari as a canonical work and an attempt to create a Malay literary canon", in *The Canon in Southeast Asian Literatures: Literatures of Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam*, edited by David Smyth, Richmond: Curzon Press, 2000, pp. 183-209, at pp. 187-189.

⁸ M. M. Falarti, *Malay Kingship in Kedah: Religion, Trade and Society*, Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, 2014, pp. 47-9.

⁹ On loanwords in Malay see Petrů, "'Lands below the Winds'", pp. 152-155; in Thai see Marcinkowski, 'Southeast Asia. I'.

¹⁰ H. K. Cowan, "A Persian inscription in North Sumatra", *Tijdschrift voor Indische taal-, land- en volkenkunde*, 80:1, 1940, pp. 15-21; Elizabeth Lambourn, "From Cambay to Samudera-Pasai and Gresik: The export of Gujarati grave memorials to Sumatra and Java in the fifteenth century CE", *Indonesia and the Malay World* 31/90, 2003, 221-289, at pp. 229-230.

¹¹ Elizabeth Lambourn, "The formation of the *batu Aceh* tradition in fifteenth-century Samudera-Pasai", *Indonesia and the Malay World*, 32:93, 2004, pp. 211-248, at p. 233.

¹² Thibault D'Herbert, "'The Lord of the Elephant': Interpreting the Islamicate epigraphic, numismatic and literary material from the Mrauk U period of Arakan (ca. 1430–1784)", *Journal of Burma Studies*, 19:2, 2015, pp. 341–70 at p. 347 for the coinage, and pp. 351-3, 367-9 for the inscription.

¹³ Mohamad Nasrin Mohamad Nasir, "Persian influences in the mysticism of Hamzah Fansuri", in *Measuring the Effect of Iranian Mysticism in Southeast Asia, Presentations of the International Seminar*, edited by Imtiyaz Yusuf, Kuala Lumpur, 2004, pp. 74-99.

¹⁴ Annabel Teh Gallop, *The Legacy of the Malay Letter*, London: The British Library, 1994, p. 13, citing MS Leiden Or 1764; on fols 2a-b of the Leiden MS there appear slightly garbled quotations in Persian from a letter of a Sultan Bahadur. These do not appear in an abridgement of this *terasul* manual, MS SOAS, London, no. 25, 932.

¹⁵ Alessandro Bausani, "Un manoscritto persiano-malese di grammatica arabe del XVI secolo", *Annali dell'Istituto Orientale di Napoli*, 19, 1969, pp. 69-98.

¹⁶ Alessandro Bausani, "Note su una antologia inedita di versi mistici persiani con versione interlineare malese", *Annali dell'Istituto Orientale di Napoli*, 18, 1968, pp. 39-66.

¹⁷ British Library, MS Or. 13295, fol. 191a. I am grateful to Annabel Teh Gallop for drawing this to my attention.

¹⁸ These works will form the subject of a much more detailed subsequent publication I am planning; in the meanwhile, for examples of Arabic texts copied in Southeast Asia copied with interlinear translations (in this case largely Javanese), see R. Friedrich and L.W.C. van den Berg, *Codicum Arabicorum in Bibliotheca Societatis Artium et Scientiarum quae Bataviae floret asservatorum Catalogum*, Batavia: Bruning and Wijt, The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1873. These manuscripts are now held in the Perpustakaan Nasional, Jakarta.

¹⁹ Jorge Dos Santos Alves and Nader Nasiri-Moghaddam, “Une lettre en persan de 1519 sur la situation à Melaka”, *Archipel* 75, 2008, pp. 145-166.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 146: “il ne s’agit pas d’une lettre officielle mais d’une lettre personnelle, qui est peut-être la première du genre du monde malaise”.

²¹ This sentence has been misunderstood in the French translation, which renders it as ‘votre serviteur n’a personne.’ It is necessary to understand a missing indirect object –*rā* to translate the Persian correctly: *dād īn banda[-rā] hīch kas nadād*.

²² The meaning of the word *kupān* is not fully clear (*imdād u shafaqat karda kupān-i darchīn barā-yi īn banda marhamat shawad tā nahāl gardad*). For lack of a better alternative, I follow Alves and Nasiri-Moghaddam in translating as ‘monopoly’. *Nahāl gardad* is not listed in the dictionaries, but must derive from *nahāl*, ‘young tree’ > ‘flourish’. I am very grateful to David Durand-Guédy on this point.

²³ *Sic*, for *jāndirāzī*.

²⁴ Jean Aubin, “Les documents arabes, persans et turcs de la Torre do Tombo”, *Le Latin et l’Astrolabe: Recherches sur le Portugal de la Renaissance, son expansion en Asie et les relations internationales*, edited Jean Aubin, Lisbonne/Paris: Centre Culturel Calouste Gulbenkian/Commission National pour les Commémorations des Découvertes Portugaises, 2000, II, pp. 417-452

²⁵ For this see A.C.S. Peacock, “Three Arabic letters from North Sumatra of the sixteenth and seventeenth-centuries”, *Indonesia and the Malay World*, 44:129, 2016, pp. 188-210, especially pp. 190-192.

²⁶ For this term see, with further references, Petrù, “Lands below the Winds”.

²⁷ Tomé Pires, *The Summa Oriental*, trans. Armando Cortesão, London: Hakluyt Society, 1944, II, p. 240.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 255.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 268.

³⁰ I am very grateful to Dr Annabel Teh Gallop for alerting me to the existence of these letters and generously sharing images of them with me. In general on the Aceh letters in the Danish National Archive, see Annabel Teh Gallop, “*Elevatio* in Malay diplomatics”, *Annales Islamologiques* 41, 2007, pp. 41-57, especially pp. 46-48

³¹ For the characteristics of Malay epistolography, see Gallop, *The Legacy of the Malay Letter*; for a comparison with Middle Eastern conventions see also Peacock, “Three Arabic letters”.

³² Light Collection, School of Oriental and African Studies, London, MS 20320, vol. 4, fol. 4. I am indebted to Abdur-Rahman Muhammad Amin for this reference, which only came to my attention at a late stage during the writing of this article.

³³ Cf. Gallop, “*Elevatio* in Malay diplomatics”, 46-48; Peacock, “Three Arabic letters”.

³⁴ See Peacock, “Three Arabic letters”.

³⁵ D’Hubert, “The Lord of the Elephant,” p. 352, n. 31.

³⁶ The Burmese and English texts will be published with historical commentary in İsmail Hakkı Kadı and A.C.S. Peacock (eds), *Ottoman-Southeast Asian Relations: Sources from the Ottoman Archives*, Leiden: Brill, forthcoming.

³⁷ For example, Prime Ministry Ottoman Archive, Istanbul, document no A.MKT.MHM. 457/55 (5), a letter dated 1872 from Acehese ministers to the Ottoman sultan, is in Arabic but starts in Turkish: *Şevketlü, azametlü, kudretlü, merhametlü*.

³⁸ I am indebted to Patricia Herbert for information on the Burmese version; her full analysis will appear in Kadı and Peacock (eds), *Ottoman-Southeast Asian Relations*.

³⁹ İsmail Hakkı Kadı, A.C.S. Peacock and Annabel Teh Gallop, “Writing history: The Acehese embassy to Istanbul, 1849-1852”, in *Mapping the Acehese Past*, edited by R. Michael Feener, Patrick Daly and Anthony Reid, Leiden: KITLV, 2011, pp. 163-181, pp. 259-278.

⁴⁰ <https://sejarah-nusantara.anri.go.id>. Accessed 6 February 2018.

⁴¹ I base the figure of 8568 on the information given by <https://sejarah-nusantara.anri.go.id/diplomatic-letters/>.

⁴² *Daghregister gehouden int Casteel Batavia*, Batavia: Departement van Kolonien and Lembaga Kebudayaan Indonesia, 1887-1931, vol. 7, pp. 189-90; vol. 17, pp. 359-50; Archive File 2470, fol. 169-271, file 2497, fol. 1293-1313, file 2498, fol. 351-424, file 2508, fol. 422-424, file 2516, fol. 590-628, file 2528, fol. 374-375, fol. 2523, fol. 637-640, fol. 640-642, fol. 642-643, fol. 960-963. The original Dutch handwritten translation can be viewed at <https://sejarah-nusantara.anri.go.id/diplomatic-letters/>, and their printed transcriptions in the *Daghregister* volumes.

⁴³ ANRI Archive File 3574, fol. 500-512.

⁴⁴ This text is mentioned by Michael Aung-Thwin, “Keynote: The myth of “Splendid Isolation””, in *Bagan and the World: Early Myanmar and its Global Connections*, edited by Gok Geok Yian, John N. Miksic and Michael Aung-Thwin, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2018, pp. 1-14 at pp. 4 and 14, n. 1. It bears the title *Iran Than Yauk Sa Tan*, and is in the form of a *parabuik*, a folding book.