Islamic seals from Southeast Asia were traditionally stamped in lampblack, which was easily susceptible to damage. On some letters, the seal has its own paper cover, to protect it from smudging when the letter or document was folded. The cover was made from a small piece of paper, which was affixed to the letter on one side or at one point with glue or a small piece of red wax, which acted like a hinge and allowed the paper cover to be lifted up so the seal could be inspected. Sometimes these paper seal covers were cut into decorative shapes such as petals or circles which follow the outlines of the seal. Most seal covers were probably removed on receipt of the letter, or were lost over the course of time, and on many letters and documents the only trace of a now-vanished paper seal cover is a little blob of red wax alongside the seal.

The use of lampblack as a sealing medium in the Malay world began to decline in the early twentieth century in favour of ink. Intriguingly, precisely at a time when seal covers were no longer strictly necessary for practical purposes, in some areas these seal flaps began to be developed as a purely decorative artefact, placed over seals stamped in ink which were in no danger of smudging. Some of the most beautiful seal covers are found on letters from Kehatan, cut out in gossamer-thin tracing or 'onion-peel' paper, with delicate floral and foliate patterns recalling the tracery wooden panels which adorn the walls of palaces and noble houses. Like the intricate cut-out patterns on the paper wrappers of royal envelopes, these examples of 'Malay origami' should be highlighted as an amusing and unexplored traditional Malay art form.

Malay origami: decorative paper seal covers

East Asia were traditionally stamped with paper seals, but these were easily susceptible to damage. One way to protect them was by affixing them to documents. The cover was made of paper, often with a layer of red wax on the inside, and then folded over the wax, sealing the document. This method prevented damage from smudging or soiling the documents.

The use of lampblack as a sealing medium in the Malay world began to decline in the early twentieth century in favour of ink. Intriguingly, precisely at a time when seal covers were no longer strictly necessary for practical purposes, in some areas these seal flaps began to be developed as a purely decorative artefact, placed over seals stamped in ink which were in no danger of smudging. Some of the most beautiful seal covers are found on letters from Kelantan, cut out in gossamer-thin tracing or ‘onion-skin’ paper, with delicate floral and foliate patterns recalling the tracery of wooden panels which adorn the walls of palaces and noble houses. Like the intricate cut-out patterns on the paper wrappers of royal envelopes, these examples of Malay origami should be highlighted as an unseen and unexplored traditional Malay art form.

Above: Delightful paper cover for the lampblack seal of Sultan Syed Kechil of Selangor (c.1864 - 1930). At the top of the seal is the name of the Prophet, ‘Mohamed’, green twice in mirror-writing; followed by Sultan Abdul Jalil’s signature, ‘Kechil’. Below the seal is a small square of fabric, on an illuminated letter to the king of Prussia, 29 Moharam 1262/27 January 1849. Museum für Islamische Kunst, Berlin, LG 1893.

Left: Green papier mache cover over the seal of Sultan Taha Saifuddin of Jambi (see 5.6) on his letter in Arabic to Sultan Abdulmecid of Turkey, 1858. Prime Ministry Ottoman Archives, Istanbul, LHR 75/4531.
Datuk John Gullick (1916–2012) was the last in a long line of British scholar-administrators of colonial Malaya. His intimate familiarity with Malay custom learned first-hand from his time in the Malayan Civil Service and his encyclopedic knowledge of earlier British writings on the Malay world informed his own prodigious output of publications, which always respected the role of personality in the historical process.

Gullick’s service in Malaya was spent primarily on the west coast, in the state of Negeri Sembilan. Settled largely by Minangkabaus immigrants from Sumatra, Negeri Sembilan differed from the other peninsular Malay states in having not a sultan but a paramount ruler, the Yang Dipertuan Besar, who ruled in concert with other senior hereditary chiefs, the four Undang. As Gullick recalls here, in 1948 he was personally involved in one of the last attested – albeit ultimately unsuccessful – attempts by an old-fashioned Negeri Sembilan stateman to seal an official document by the traditional lampblack method.1

“When the terms of the Federation of Malaya (to replace the Malayan Union) had been agreed, it was decided that there would be a grand signing ceremony in the dining room of King’s House, Kuala Lumpur, at which the rulers of all the States, with their respective following, would assemble.2 The floor of the room was absolutely festooned with electric cables for all the news cameras (no TV in those days) and a plane was standing by at the airport to fly one set of the signed documents to London, as soon as they were ready. It was all very public and very tightly timetabled.

At the time I was Secretary to the Resident Commissioner, Negeri Sembilan, and – unlike other States – we had to get no less than six signatures (of any document affecting the NS) on parade – H.H.,3 the Tunku Besar Tampin and the four Undang. H.H. (who had a KL residence as a base for himself with his kinsmen from Tampin) regarded the Undang as country cousins, yokiks with whom he did not wish to be seen in public. So it fell to me to write to them and ask them to make their way separately to a rendezvous in KL to meet a couple of hours before the ceremony. They were each asked to bring their seals of office, since several copies of each constitutional document had to be sealed by all concerned – some 50–100 documents in all.

The four Undang duly arrived at our meeting place, and each had brought his seal. The other receipts, so far as I remember, had modern seals which presented no operational difficulties. But the Undang of Johor was an elderly (and very nice) old countryman who had held his office for many years in a traditional style. Wrapped in a sheet of a Malay newspaper he had brought a metal seal such as you describe at p.53 of Golden Letters,4 and a metal lamp, filled with coconut oil, whose flame would blacken the seal, as described by Buckley, p.40 ['The impression of the native chops on the paper is made by holding the brass seal in the smoke of a flame until it is covered with lampblack, and then pressing it on the paper’ (Buckley 1984:40)].

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(Almost) the last Malay lampblack seal

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The four Undangs duly arrived at our meeting place and each had brought his seal. The other three, so far as I remember, had modern seals which presented no operational difficulties. But the Undang of Johol was an elderly (and very nice) old countryman who had held his office for many years in a traditional style. Wrapped in a sheet of a Malay newspaper he had brought a metal seal such as you describe at p.S3 of Golden Letters,” and a metal lamp, filled with coconut oil, whose flame would blacken the seal, as described by Buckley, p.40. “The impression of the native chaps on the paper is made by holding the brass seal in the smoke of a flame until it is covered with lampblack, and then pressing it on the paper” (Buckley 1984: 40).

This was unfamiliar technology to me and I viewed it with misgiving. So the Datu, and one or two lumbagas even more obviously off the trees of Johol than he, adjourned with me to the kitchen of King’s House to have a dummy run with his seal. Whatever may have been the result with manuscripts of former times, the Johol seal was useless on modern paper. The soot just produced a blur. The thought of using the lamp on the dining table of King’s House, with a dozen Sultan’s and accompanying Tunkus (plus cameramen and the colonial top brass in uniform) looking superciliously on, and then inspecting the blackened mess on the page (opposite the Johol space) to which they had to add their more elegant contribution, was pretty daunting. So – the Undang found it severely amusing – we tried ‘inking’ the Johol seal by pressing it on an ordinary office ink-pad. The result was not what my grandchildren would call ‘brilliant’, but it was at least as good as using the soot from the lamp. So, we did it that way.”

Seal of the Yaa Tuan, the senior hereditary ruler of Negeri Sembilan, showing how briefly lampblack can smudge. Sultan Mahmud Syah of Sultan Abdul Jalil Munsamin Syah ziyal Allah f al-adil f harikun cinta ... , "Sultan Mahmud Syah, son of Sultan Abdul Jalil Munsamin Syah, the shadow of God on earth, dated the year ... " (94407), 53 mm. Impressed on the record of the sale of a slave by Eicke Awan Semat to Baha Su for RM30, with the seal of authority of the Yaa Tuan of Seri Menanti, 22 Sya’al 1226/15 July 1869. RE: 92/1952/27/47, c.200.

1 While I began my study of Malay seals, John Gallick plumbed his unequalled command of the literature relating to the peninsular Malay states to provide me with many references to all aspects of Malay seals. The eye-witness account reproduced here was included in a three-page typed account compilation of series entitled ‘Malay seals’ which he sent me in December 1992, and was subsequently published as Gallick (2007).
2 This signing took place on 21 January 1848, with Sir Edward Gent representing the British Government.
3 Veng Dipertuan Besar Tunshah Abdul Rahman (r. 1933 - 1980).
New times,
new ways of sealing

In the late eighteenth century, seal presses came into use in Europe, producing raised-stamped or embossed seal impressions directly onto the paper, without the use of any intermediary sealing medium. These presses, usually made of steel, had on the base a seal engraved in relief with the inscription the right way round, with a corresponding intaglio seal above. The paper was trapped between the two parts which were pressed together, creating a raised impression. By the second half of the nineteenth century the use of embossed seals was widespread in Ottoman bureaucracy, and by the end of the century can also be found in Southeast Asia. In 1882, Sultan Abdul Samad of Selangor, in conversation with a British official in Kuala Langat, C.H.A. Turner, mooted the subject of a new lever chop being commissioned from England and directed me to write to the Resident on the subject. H.H. wants a smaller chop than the present one, with the text in the band and his title on it as in his present chop, but wished the addition of the star and crescent immediately over his title in the inner circle and an inscription of his office on the outer circle.

Around the same time, other developments were also taking place. The widening use of printed letterheaded stationery spread from Europe to the Muslim world, and in some cases began to supplant the validatory role of the seal. No new development was more significant than the invention of the rubber stamp, which soon became ubiquitous, accompanied by its staplemate, the purple ink pad.

By the early twentieth century, local preferences and traditions were in decline, as reflected in a collection of royal Malay letters to the British crown. In 1932, formal portraits of King George V and Queen Mary were sent to the rulers of the nine peninsular Malay states and to Brunei. Letters of acknowledgement and thanks from all ten rulers, dated June to August 1932, are held in the Royal Archives at Windsor Castle. Only the seal of Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin of Brunei – located in relative geographical and political isolation – is still stamped in lampblack. Those of the rulers of the peninsular states are all in ink, in a variety of colours: red as usual for the Sultan of Kedah and the Raja of Perlis, black for the Sultan of Pahang, grey for the Sultan of Terengganu, and purple for the Sultans of Perak, Kelantan and Selangor. The seal of Yang Dipertuan Besar Tunjuk Muhammad of Negeri Sembilan was embossed directly on the paper. Sultan Ibrahim of Johor, an intimate of the British royal family, wrote by hand in English on headed notepaper without a seal, indicating how in certain contexts the combination of printed letterheaded paper and a signature had begun to negate the role of the seal.

New times, new ways of sealing

In the 19th century, seal presses came into use in England or engraved seals impressions without the use of any intermediary...