Malay Manuscripts: An Introduction
The written word has always been at the apex of art in the Islamic world. This is no less true of the Malay world, where Muslim calligraphers have worked diligently for more than five hundred years. Although their efforts have rarely been discussed, this book provides an introduction to a field that is beginning to receive the acclaim it deserves. Covering everything from the Malay literary output to the types of watermarks found on regional manuscripts, it is a fascinating insight into aesthetics. The survey is as varied and intriguing as the many different materials on which these manuscripts were written.

"The beautiful work of an author, the beautiful poem of a poet, the beautiful painting of a painter or building of architect reveal the inner beauty of these men."

(al-Ghazali 1058 - 1111)
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Introduction

I consider the Malay Archipelago to include the Malay Peninsula as far as Tenasserim, and the Nicobar Islands on the West, the Philippines on the North, and the Solomon Islands beyond New Guinea, on the East.”

(Alfred Russel Wallace 1823 - 1913)

The Land and the Literature

The Malay Archipelago is a vast chain of islands that was famed in antiquity for its gold. The name ‘Golden Chersonese’ was given by the Greek scholar Ptolemy, who included the term on his map of the region.

In addition to gold, the region’s importance lay in the part it played in the sea trade between China and India. Influenced by these two great empires, the Malay Archipelago emerged as a centre of Hindu-Buddhist religion and culture. With the spread of Buddhism to China, many Chinese pilgrims sailed to India through the Straits of Malacca. Some stopped en route and stayed for a while in maritime Southeast Asia to study Buddhism. One recorded example is the Chinese Buddhist scholar Fa Hsien, who was caught in a storm in 414 AD. He landed on the island...
A Malay sepulchre in Sumatra photographed in the 19th century
of Java, where he stayed for five months. Among the leading Hindu-Buddhist centres of the time were Lembah Bujang in Kedah and Borobudur in Java.

Arab Muslim merchants started to participate in the sea trade with China as early as the 7th century, based on the records in the History of Tang written in 651. The most convenient sea passage to China from the Middle East at that time was through the Malay Archipelago. The early presence of Muslims in the region has been demonstrated by several tombstones found in the Malay Archipelago. These include the grave of Sheikh Abdul Qadir ibn Husin Shah Alam 905 AD / 290 AH in Kedah, the grave of Sultan Abdul Majid ibn Mohamad Shah's daughter 1048 AD / 440 AH in Brunei and that of Fatimah binti Maimun 1082 AD / 475 AH in Gresik.

After being introduced by traders, Islam spread to royal families and the rest of society. The first Islamic kingdom in the Malay Archipelago was probably Pasai, which had Muslim sultan by the end of 13th century. Another Islamic kingdom was Perlak, as noted by Ibn Batutta and Marco

*A map showing important fortresses in Sumatra, Malacca and Java during the Dutcib era*
Polo during their separate journeys in the 14th century. In the city of Perlak they found a Muslim sultan and a Muslim community which practised Islamic teaching. Both Pasai and Perlak were small kingdoms on the northeast of the island of Sumatra. In the first decades of the 15th century, Malacca established itself as an Islamic kingdom that would develop into the region’s mightiest empire. After falling to the Portuguese in 1511, Malacca’s importance as a trading entrepot between China and the Middle East was diminished.

The Malay Archipelago has a long history of writing and literature. The earliest evidence of this are the simple wall drawings by the Australo-Melanesian group who lived in Niah cave, Borneo, during the palaeolithic era of the Stone Age. It was then developed into a palaeographic form of script under the influence of Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. Of the types of scripts in the Malay world before and after the coming of Islam, two prominent pre-Islamic variants are Pallava and Kawi, of Islamic scripts there are Arabic and Jawi.

During the region’s Hindu-Buddhist period, the written word was considered to be a sacred thing. According to the prominent scholar of Malay studies, Syed Mohd Naquib Al-Attas, scripts were monopolised by the ruling and priestly elites to strengthen their position in that society.

In contrast, when Islam reached the Malay world, all Muslims were required to gain knowledge through reading. They were inspired by the Qur’anic verses:

Read! In the name of thy Lord and Cherisher, Who created Created Man, out of a mere clot of congealed blood
Proclaim! And thy Lord is Most Bountiful
He Who taught (the use of) the Pen Taught man that which he knew not
(Surah Al-‘Alaq: verses 1-5)

Another factor that encouraged Muslims to read is the requirement of the second pillar of Islam: to pray five times a day. In their daily prayers, Muslims are required to read two surahs of the Qur’an in every raka’a – complete cycle of standing, prostration (sujud) and bowing (ruku). The most important surah of the prayers is al-Fatihah (the Opening), accompanied by other short surahs from the Qur’an, such as Surah al-İkhlas and Surah Al-Nas, which are optional. There are two different methods used by the Malays for learning how to read the Qur’an, and these have remained until today. First, there is memorising through verbal
transmission; second, there is knowing the script. The second method necessitates learning the Arabic script, which is different from learning Arabic as a spoken language.

In the Malay Peninsula, one of the most essential books used by Muslims for learning how to read the Qur'an is the Muqaddam (the Book for Beginners). This begins with the Arabic alphabet, from alif to yunus, and ends with reading selected short surahs, of which there are 38 in this book. These are memorised and used by Muslims in their daily prayers. After completing the Muqaddam, Malay Muslims have traditionally started to read the 30 juz of the Qur'an. To refine the reading and to have a deep understanding of the Qur'an are considered to be separate and advanced subjects.

This process of learning was explained by Peter J. Wilson, a scholar of anthropology and sociology, in his writing, "Islam is the major institution that not only draws Malays together in sympathy but also unites Malays

*The Muqaddam provides instruction for beginners learning Arabic and the Qur'an*
to peoples of other parts of the world and to a system of thought and behaviour located above and beyond any specific culture. Villagers are instructed in the teaching of Islam and in the reading of the Koran from an early age. Both in the home and in small religious schools run by local guru (teacher)."

Despite the domination of the Malay world by Western powers from the 16th to the mid-20th century, the development of Malay manuscripts and literary works continued. This reached its peak of activity between the 15th and 17th centuries. Translation was among the most important elements of Malay literary production. Manuscripts from the Arab world and Iran were translated and adapted into the Malay language for local consumption. The most popular subjects for translation were religion and literature. A prominent example of the latter is the Hikayat Bayan Budiman (the Parrot’s Seventy Tales).

_A group of male students with their Qur’an teacher from an 1849 drawing_
The other factor which led to a golden era of Malay manuscripts during that period was the political situation. Among the objectives of the Portuguese and Dutch administrations were suppressing the local religion and monopolising the trade in natural resources such as spices, gold and tin. Goaded by this, the Malays strengthened the bonds between themselves with Islamic education and traditions that were passed from generation to generation through manuscripts. Of the different colonial powers, it was the British government that gave more encouragement for Malay literature to develop in the Malay Peninsula and Singapore. Before the 20th century, there was considerable demand for Malay manuscripts to be added to the collections of colonial officers.

Printing of Malay books in the Malay world started in the early 19th century. The first locally printed Malay book was from Malacca, in 1817. This was, in fact, a Christian missionary book. The earliest Muslim printing in the Malay region dates back to 1854. This was the result of a Muslim from Palembang who bought a lithographic press in Singapore and started to print copies of the Qur’an with notes in Malay. The first Malay newspaper, known as Soerat Kabar Bahasa Melatijoe, was printed in Surabaya in Java in 1856, while the first Malay newspaper in Jawi script was Jawi Peranakan, which began life in Singapore in 1876. By the late 19th century, Malay Islamic books were being printed in several cities in the Middle East and India, including Bombay, Cairo, Mecca and Istanbul.

At this time there were two types of education system in the Malay Peninsula: one was based on the English model while the other was a vernacular Malay and religious system. Students from these two streams not only contributed to the development of writing, but also participated in the printing industry. The emergence of printed books, newspapers and magazines inevitably caused a decline in the production of handwritten Malay manuscripts.
Chapter 1

The Malay Medium

Malay is the main language of communication for the inhabitants of the Malay Archipelago, and it has been the lingua franca of the region for at least five centuries. The Malay script known as Jawi is derived from Arabic. Both Arabic and Jawi have been widely used for religious and secular manuscripts since Islam was established in the region. Jawi is a combination of Arabic and Persian scripts, with additional letters added as an adaptation to local phonetics. These additional characters are 'pa', 'nga', 'nya', 'cha' and 'gha'.
Trade was the prime factor that led to the introduction of Jawi script into Southeast Asia. The role played by Muslim merchants from the Arab world, India and China was vital. Despite their commercial commitments, these individuals did not overlook their responsibility as Muslims to carry out duties as 'da'ie'. This entails the teaching of Islam and disseminating the religion wherever they went. Malay was not only used for everyday communication and for the propagation of Islam. Its importance in trade and diplomatic relationships can be seen in letters, decrees and treaties between local rulers and foreign diplomats. The written medium was Jawi, also used extensively for literature and religious studies.

The influx of loan words has influenced the Malay vocabulary, which has expanded its use in regular discourse as well as in writing. Many Malay words have been borrowed and adapted from foreign languages and dialects, including Arabic, Sanskrit, Portuguese, Tamil, Chinese and English. These words continue to be a part of the Malay lexicon.

Malay in Jawi script was widely used in this region until the early 20th century. Today, use of the script is being revived. In several states of Malaysia, such as Kelantan, Terengganu, Melaka and Kedah, as well as in Indonesia and Brunei, Jawi is employed for religious purposes. The
language has also been revised, with amendments being made to the spelling and grammar. A standard phonetics system has been adopted and, in Malaysia, Jawi script has been introduced at school level as part of the curriculum.

The Malay manuscripts from the JAKIM collection (Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia) housed in the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia cover a wide range of topics, both religious and secular. Dating from the 18th to the 20th century, most of these manuscripts were written by hand in naskh or in a variant Malay script. Naskh is the most common script used in Arabic writing. It is also the simplest and easiest to read. In addition to Jawi, other local languages, such as Javanese, Siamese, Cham and Buginese, have been used for writing manuscripts, often adopting Arabic or Jawi as the main text. In terms of word and sentence structure, the manuscripts produced in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, especially in the Straits Settlements (Malacca, Singapore and Penang), show more consistency. This is probably a result of using a standardised system of Jawi orthography at school level, especially when it came to producing textbooks. In addition, Jawi was not only used for printing but in administration, business, school and the press.
The early 20th century witnessed vast growth in the Malay press after the release of ‘Jawi Peranakan’ newspapers in Singapore. *Utusan Melayu* was first published in 1907 in Singapore and is still operating today. The current version of the paper is in Malay with romanised Jawi.

Jawi script has been through various orthographic improvements over the years, to make it compatible with Malay phonetics. In 1904 a committee was set up to produce a guidebook to change Jawi to Malay ‘Rumi’ orthography, which was known as ‘Romanised Malay Spelling’. It was also known as ‘Sistem Ejaan Wilkinson’. Zainal Abidin Ahmad, also known as Za’ba, rearranged Malay Rumi orthography in 1958, affecting the Wilkinson Malay Orthography System which had been used by schools since 1904.

Lithographed or stone-stamped manuscripts were created in the Malay world from the 19th to the early 20th century. These usually comprise religious books, Malay literature, folklore, state laws, decrees and religious fatwa. The lithographed manuscripts were more consistent than...
handwritten manuscripts in the words used as well as the sentence structure and punctuation marks. Improvements were also made to the naskh script and there is greater consistency of spelling.

After 1900, mechanically printed Jawi books or 'kitab Jawi' started to be published in the Malay world. The orthography, styles of writing and the text arrangement were more properly and consistently applied in printed books. There were many newspapers published from the middle of the 19th century, including publications in Surabaya, East Java, Soerat Kabar Bahasa Melayu (1856), Soerat Chabar Betawi in Jakarta (1858) and Bientang Timoer in Surabaya (1862).

Jawi Peranakan was a weekly newspaper published in 1876 using Malay in Jawi script published by a group of Jawi Peranakan of Indian descent. It was the only Malay-language paper published and distributed in Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia at that time. It featured international news, government notices, editorial and poetry columns, as well as letters from readers and discussion of Malay community issues. An example of early printing that was not used for periodicals is the Jawi version of the Terengganu State law, dated 2 November 1911, which concerns the criteria for a raja to be appointed sultan. In this case, the use of Jawi in terms of grammar, sentence structure and spelling is more standardised and closer to the current form of the language.

Today, concern from the Malaysian government has led the Ministry of Arts, Culture and Heritage to actively promote the use of Jawi script. There are campaigns to encourage greater interest among the young and to encourage its preservation as part of the history and identity of the Malays. In Indonesia, the equivalent of Jawi, known as 'Arab Gandul', and 'Pegon', the form of Arabic script used to write the Javanese language are both losing popularity.
The Diversity of Malay Manuscripts

Malay manuscripts can be divided into three main categories: those written by Malay authors and those copied or translated from other sources. All of these manuscripts would be written by hand.

Copied Manuscripts
Islam originated in the Arabian Peninsula and most Islamic books are written in Arabic. The religion came to this region with the Arabic language. The teachings of Islam were generally translated into the local language, but in some cases the written word needed to be kept in its original form - Arabic. The Qur'an is a paramount example of this; it is a protected book that should be copied in the Arabic language by scribes of exemplary character.
"...in a Book well guarded"
(Surah al-Waqiah: verse 78)

"By no means! For it is indeed a Message of instruction, Therefore let whoever will, keep it in remembrance. It is in Books held in honour, Exalted, kept pure and holy. (Written) by the hands of scribes, Honourable and Pious and Just."
(Surah Abasa: verses 11-16)

In the Malay world, the Qur'an was copied by professional and religious scribes who mostly worked under the patronage of a sultan and lived near to the palace complex. Sometimes, the copied manuscripts required a verbal translation and explanation from the scholars or the religious teachers. Other prominent examples of copied manuscripts are marhaban (religious songs) and the prayerbook Dalil al-Khairat Wa Shawariq al-Anwar (Guide to Goodness and Rising Light).

The Sultan of Solo and his consort greeted by religious scholars
Translated Manuscripts

The second category of manuscript comprises direct translations from an original source. The majority of these have been translated from Arabic into local languages such as Javanese, Buginese, Acehnese and Malay. Until the mid-20th century, the most widely used script was Jawi.

The majority of these translations relate to religious studies, including tawheed (the concept of Oneness of Allah), fiqih (Islamic jurisprudence), sirah (history), hadith, ilmu al-Qur’an (Qur’anic studies) and akhlak (manners). The translators were mainly Malay students who had studied in Mecca and Medina. The sources of the subjects were manuscripts and lectures encountered during their studies. As an example, Daud Ibn Abdullah Fatani completed his translation of the book Mu’atta al-Musallab in Mecca, in 1827.

"Istah selesai fakir Ila Allah Ta’ala Daud Ibn Abdullah Fatani menterjemahkan risalah yang diberi nama ‘Mu’atta al-Musallab’ ini didalam negeri Mekab al-Musyarifab"

The content of this manuscript was taken from a lecture by Sheikh Ahmad al-Damanburi, held in Al-Haram Mosque, on 23rd Dzulhijjah 1178 AH (1765 AD)
In tawheed manuscripts, the focus is on *iman* (faith). There is an explanation of the 20 characteristics of Allah; the 99 names of Allah; the 25 names of prophets, as mentioned in the Qur'an; characteristics of the prophets; the six pillars of faith; and the five pillars of Islam. These remain the primary subjects for discussion of Islamic faith. The contents can also be categorised as Islamic theology and philosophy when scholars explain these concepts in greater detail.

Another important subject for translated manuscripts is *fiqh*. This is the statement of the whole corpus of duties, whether forbidden, obligatory or recommended. *Fiqh* explains the means of implementing *ibadat* (religious practice, i.e. prayer, fasting, zakat and hajj) as mentioned in the Qur'an and hadith. Among the other sub-divisions are: *fiqh ul-ibadat* (Islamic jurisprudence in religious practice); *fiqh ul-jenayah* (crimes); *fiqh ul-muamalat* (Islamic jurisprudence in business and transactions); and *fiqh ul-usrah* (Islamic jurisprudence for the family).

The third subject is *straße*. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ is a role model for Muslims. Islamic history introduced and described his life, his family and his companions. This subject has long been translated into the Malay language to provide an example and to be a mirror to Muslims.