

ISLAM, TRADE AND POLITICS ACROSS THE INDIAN OCEAN

In 2008, the British Academy adopted a three-year collaborative project to look at how Southeast Asia had long been connected to the wider world across the Indian Ocean – in particular, to the Middle East through the faith of Islam. Dr İsmail Hakkı Kadı, Dr Annabel Teh Gallop and Dr Andrew Peacock report on the preliminary results of research in the Ottoman archives.

Despite the vast distances across the Indian Ocean, Southeast Asia and the Middle East have been linked since antiquity by trade. Muslim merchants from Persia and the Arab lands first brought Islam to what is now Malaysia and Indonesia, while Southeast Asians came to the Middle East on pilgrimage to the Holy Cities of Islam, Mecca and Medina, or in search of learning. These Middle Eastern connections played a crucial part in the formation of Southeast Asia's identity, both culturally and religiously, and scholarship has concentrated on their Arab aspect. Yet for the Muslims of Southeast Asia, the Ottoman Empire was the great Islamic power which, they hoped, might protect them from European colonialism. Even in the 20th century Turkish influence remained strong, with the founder of modern Turkey, Atatürk, regarded as a model by independence leaders like Sukarno in Indonesia, and even in Burma. Despite growing interest in the Ottomans and their relations with the world beyond (as witnessed by the British Academy-sponsored conference of 2007, *The Frontiers of the Ottoman World*),¹ little work has yet examined the Turkish connection with this furthest frontier of the Ottoman world.

The new British Academy-funded collaborative research project, *Islam, Trade and Politics across the Indian Ocean*, explores these links, which date back to the 16th century. The earliest attested contacts were through ambassadors sent from Aceh to request Ottoman assistance against the Portuguese, the first Europeans to attempt to assert political and economic control in the region. The Ottomans responded by sending cannon and some men on the perilous journey across the Portuguese-controlled Indian Ocean, but for the following two centuries the Ottoman government was preoccupied by problems nearer to home. Nonetheless, links continued through trade – Southeast Asian ceramics have been found in excavations of Ottoman sites, as well as at the Imperial Palace, the

Topkapı – and through religion, with Southeast Asian scholars coming to study in Ottoman cities like Mecca, Medina, Cairo and even Istanbul. The Turkish connection remained potent in Southeast Asia as local rulers sought to bolster their legitimacy by claiming ancestors from 'Rum' – i.e. the Ottoman lands. Memories of these Turkish contacts are preserved in Malay literature, while Ottoman influences also appeared in the material culture. Furthermore, Sufis and mystics also appeared in the material culture. Furthermore, Sufis and mystics also appeared in the material culture. Furthermore, Sufis and mystics also appeared in the material culture.

19th-century links

The political links between Southeast Asia and the Ottomans were revived in the mid-19th century, again as local rulers sought protection

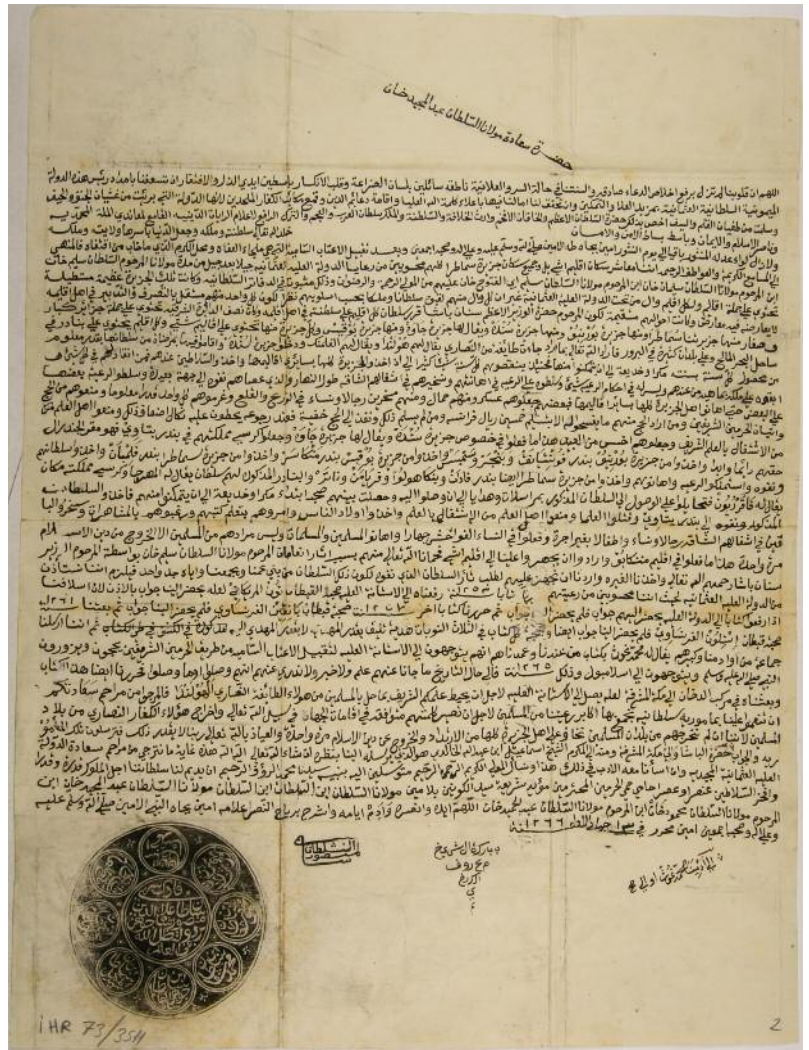


Figure 1. The Arabic letter of Mansur Shah of Aceh to the Ottoman Sultan Abdülmejid. Prime Ministry Ottoman Archive, Istanbul, I.HR. 73/23511.

from colonialism, this time Dutch and British. Although the Ottoman government was wary of acceding outright the requests of Southeast Asian sultanates like Aceh to be recognized as Ottoman subjects, it maintained close interest in the region, demonstrated through its establishment of consulates in cities such as Jakarta (Batavia), Rangoon, Manila and Singapore. Ottoman involvement in the region was prompted not just by normal diplomatic considerations but also by their policy of Pan-Islamism, of trying to strengthen the Empire, now beset by threats in Europe, by promoting the Sultan-Caliph as protector and leader of all Muslims. This is by far the best documented and most complex phase of Ottoman-Southeast Asian relations. Although the *Islam, Trade and Politics* project will also examine cultural links through material culture (which will be the subject of a public exhibition in 2011–12), in its first phases we have concentrated on unearthing Ottoman archival material concerning these interactions in this period. The work requires in-depth research in the catalogues of the Ottoman Archives in Istanbul, which to date has yielded around 800 entries. These correspond to more than 10,000 pages of documents, which have been partly copied for further research. Although it is too early to make definitive remarks about the content of all the material, we may nevertheless share some preliminary observations.

The documents are characterised by great diversity, both in language and contents. As one would expect, the bulk of the material is written in Ottoman Turkish, but there is also material in French, Arabic, Dutch, English, Malay, Burmese and even Tausug (a language of the Philippines). Perhaps the most striking documents, both visually and in terms of contents, are the letters sent by Southeast Asian rulers to Istanbul.

Mansur Shah of Aceh

Of special interest is the correspondence from Mansur Shah of Aceh. Most of the surviving Malay letters held in libraries and archives worldwide were sent from the Islamic kingdoms of maritime Southeast Asia to European sovereigns or trading officials. Therefore what we know about the art of the Malay letter should more properly be termed ‘the art of Malay letter-writing to Europeans’, for almost no letters between Malay rulers, or addressed to other Muslim powers, are known. Thus the recent discovery in Istanbul of original royal epistles from the Malay world is of critical importance, not just for the historical value of their contents, but also for the new light they shed on Malay diplomacies.



Two letters from Sultan Mansur Shah of Aceh, on the northern tip of Sumatra, addressed to the Ottoman Sultan Abdülmecid, illustrate this perfectly. Both contain the same appeal for aid, but the letter in Malay of 1849 and that in Arabic of 1850 look quite different, for each was crafted in the chancery of Aceh according to the epistolary protocol appropriate for that language. In the Arabic letter (Figure 1), the seal is placed in a supplicatory position right at the bottom, while the name and title of Sultan Abdülmecid have been removed from the fourth line, leaving a blank space, and placed diagonally above the text as a mark of respect, showing that the chancery practice of *elevatio* – introduced at the Ottoman court of Süleyman the Magnificent in the 16th century – was still understood at the court of Aceh in the 19th century.

The Malay letter (Figure 2) is unprecedented in its humility of tone, with the royal seal placed at the top of the letter but on the extreme left, for in Aceh the relative rank of correspondents was indicated by the placement of the seal on a sliding horizontal scale from left (from an inferior to a superior), through the middle (between equals), to right (from a superior to one of inferior rank). In this letter Sultan Mansur Shah indicated the Ottoman ruler rather than himself the uniquely Acehness royal title *Johan Berdalau*, ‘the champion endowed with sovereign power’, and the letter is not addressed to the visage of the emperor, but to ‘beneath the soles of our lord’s feet’. Never before have any of the three self-abasing epistolary features highlighted here in any other royal letter from Aceh, renowned as one of the greatest Malay kingdoms in the world, renowned as the most powerful Malay kingdom and other diplomatic devices Sultan Mansur Shah positioned Aceh as an Ottoman vassal of long standing, in the hope of persuading Sultan Abdülmecid

Figure 2. The Malay letter of Mansur Shah of Aceh to the Ottoman Sultan Abdülmecid. Prime Ministry Ottoman Archive, Istanbul, I.H.R. 66/3208.

Figure 3. A map of Southeast Asia, annotated in Ottoman, presented to the Ottoman court together with the letter sent by Mansur Shah to Abdülmecid. At the centre is the island of Sumatra, several times larger than Java, with Aceh prominently marked at its northern tip. Prime Ministry Ottoman Archive, Istanbul, I.HR. 73/23511.

to send twelve fully-armed warships to expel the ‘infidel’ Dutch from the southeastern ‘frontiers of the Ottoman world’. The letter was accompanied by a map of Sumatra (Figure 3) which attempted to grossly inflate the island’s size and importance compared to Java and even India.

Other links across the ocean

Other documents provide valuable information about Ottoman Pan-Islamist policies, for these required the Ottoman court to interact continuously with political and religious authorities and ordinary people in Southeast Asia. For example, the Ottoman chancery documented the donation of the holy Qur’an and other religious books to ensure that the name of the Ottoman sultan was mentioned at prayers as the Caliph. And there are also documents concerning the Ottoman declaration of Holy War during the First World War: the Ottomans sought to capitalise on Pan-Islamic sentiment in order to stir up trouble for Britain which ruled over substantial Muslim populations in India and the Malay Peninsula.

The Ottoman authorities were also alert to foreigners’ perception of Ottoman policies. Consequently Ottoman diplomatic representatives in Europe and Southeast Asia sent samples of local newspaper articles to Istanbul together with their translations to inform the home authorities. One example is an article published in *Presse Nouvelle de Rotterdam* in 1899 concerning Javanese students in Istanbul. The Ottoman documents reveal the reason behind the Dutch interest. It seems that several Southeast Asian students (Dutch colonial subjects) had enrolled in western-style educational institutions. The Dutch aimed to control tightly the education of their colonial subjects, with the aim of producing a local elite that would contribute to the administration of the Dutch Indies while supporting the continued colonial presence. The prospect of Indonesian students receiving a western education in Istanbul, the capital of the Pan-Islamist movement, threatened to undermine not just Dutch education policy in the Indies but the very foundations of colonial rule.



The presence of Southeast Asians in the Ottoman Empire was not limited to these students in Istanbul. In particular, a large numbers of pilgrims made their ways from various parts of Southeast Asia to the Hijaz every year, and much paperwork was required to arrange their transportation and quarantine.

The travel was not all one way: there were also Ottoman subjects in Southeast Asia, especially in Jakarta (Figure 4). Disputes over the legal status of Ottoman subjects there necessitated lengthy negotiations between the Dutch and Ottoman authorities. Particularly problematic were the Hadhramis originating from southern Yemen, many of whom were merchants residing in Southeast Asia and who claimed Ottoman nationality despite the fact the Ottomans had never ruled the Hadhramaut. And the First World War brought an unprecedented number of Ottoman subjects to Southeast Asia – as prisoners of war. More than 4,000 were held in Thayetmo in Burma. The British and

Ottoman authorities corresponded about these prisoners, their circumstances and the rations they were granted via the diplomatic missions of third countries.

Resource

The documents from the Ottoman archives – which the project is collecting and will in due course publish, accompanied by translations – are thus remarkable for the range of issues they touch on, as well as their linguistic diversity. Making this resource available will assist not just scholars of Ottoman and Southeast Asian history, but will be of interest more generally to anyone interested in the history of European colonialism and the reactions it inspired – reactions which have not fully played themselves out to this day.

Note

1 Papers from this conference have just been published as *The Frontiers of the Ottoman World*, edited by A.C.S. Peacock (*Proceedings of the British Academy*, volume 156). A summary report of the conference by Dr Peacock was published in *British Academy Review*, issue 10 (2007). For more information, see www.britac.ac.uk/pubs

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Both organisations are sponsored by the British Academy. A full list of the organisations sponsored by the Academy can be found at www.britac.ac.uk/institutes/orgs.cfm



Figure 4. Passport granted by the Ottoman authorities to an Ottoman merchant resident in Batavia (modern Jakarta), dated 1911. Prime Ministry Ottoman Archive, Istanbul, HR.SYS. 563/1.