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# The Use of Seal in Early Malay Official Letters : A Personal Identity and Ethnic Culture

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## SUBMISSION TRACK

Received: March 03, 2018  
Final Revision: April 20, 2018  
Available Online: April 28, 2018

## KEYWORD

Seal, Personal Identity, Ethnic Culture, Malay Letters

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## A B S T R A C T

This brief article discuss on how the seals that were used on the official Malay letters incorporated and displayed the identity of the senders, whether they are individual dignitaries or governments. The early Malay seals are among the symbol and identity of the sender. In the traditional Malay society the seal was not something that anyone can own and use indiscriminately. The seals were used as personal symbols by the individual rulers and dignitaries and subsequently became something that was passed on as part of their inheritance. For an individual sultan or dignitary, the seal represented and displayed his identity. The concept of identity in relation to the early Malay official letters is actually the Malay identity. This article also discuss the shape and form of seal, the language used, and .calligraphy or artistic writing style.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Early Malay official letters or correspondences are among the earliest known Malay manuscripts that were significant in various ways, both to the local rulers as well as to the colonialist. These letters were among the different communication media used to establish and maintain close relations between governments, as well as for commercial and other purposes. The seal stamped onto a particular early Malay official letter was one of the various significant elements used to indicate its authenticity. This was so because the seal symbolises the identity of the sender. The receiver will know the significance of the letter based on the seal stamped on it. In the traditional Malay society the seal was not something that anyone can own and use

indiscriminately. Only specific, group, such as the government officials or dignitaries, the kings or sultans, and the western expatriates were permitted to use seal for their official letters.

### Origin of the Seals

According to Wilkinson (1955:187) the Malay word '*cap*' (seal) originated from the Urdu word '*chapp*'. In the Malay language the '*cap*' is also known as '*menterai*', or '*tera*', or even '*mohor*'. The seal was used as a substitute for the sender's signature. However, according to Mahayudin Hj. Yahya (1987:825) the word '*mohor*' originated from the Persian word '*muhr*' that means "something that has a stamp or is sealed".

He further stated that '*cap mohor*' in the Malay world also has its origin from the word "*mohur*", a form of gold coin used by the Muslims during the era of Akhbar and Jahangir. These two kings ruled India in years 1556 - 1621. During that period two forms of '*mohor*' seals were issued, one circular and the other rectangular in shape.

Based on this source, it was most likely that the influence and format of the *mohor* used in the Malay Archipelago originated from this *mohor*. It is well known that Indian traders who came to the Malay Archipelago did not only come for commercial purposes, but also brought and spread Islam to the Malay community. Thus, it was very possible that they also introduced their *mohor* to the Malay rulers and administrators at that time.

When a ruler used a seal, others began to do likewise, particularly the government dignitaries. This practise gradually spread throughout the Malay Archipelago. Later, the seals were used as personal symbols by the individual rulers and dignitaries and subsequently became something that was passed on as part of their inheritance. The first official letter in the Malay world that used a seal was the one sent by Sultan Alauddin Syah (1589-1604) from Aceh to Harry Middleton in year 1602; and the second was the letter written by His Royal Highness Kimahala Salahak Abdul Kadir from Ambon, on the letter he sent to the Governor of East India Company on 23 May 1658.

### **Forms and Shapes of Seals**

This brief article shall deliberate on how the seals that were used on the official Malay letters incorporated and displayed the identity of the senders, whether they are individual dignitaries or governments. Generally, people are not fully aware of this fact, simply because their attention is focused on the aspects of illumination, shape, structure, and contents of the letter. To facilitate the discussion the author commenced with a quick overview of the various aspects related to the seals.

A study of the development of seals used in the Malay letters reveals that the shape of seals used in the early Malay world can be categorised into various popular shapes and unique shapes. This categorisation is based on the frequency of use of the seals. In the case of unique-shaped seals, each seal was used by one specific person only and no other seals with similar shape or characteristics were used by others.

Shape of seals used for early official Malay letters that were considered popular were circle, octave, oblong, and circle with specific dent(s). The unique-shaped seals were also of various shapes, but other than the two mentioned earlier. For an individual sultan or dignitary, the seal represented and displayed his identity. Everything conveyed by the seal on a particular letter were accepted as description of the sender's personality since it was considered as his representative.

### **The Seal as an Identity**

Many are puzzled by the statement that the seal represents the sender's identity. How can a small seal contain the identity of its owner? To answer this question, it is best to first explain the concept of identity and relate it to the seal so as to facilitate understanding of the seal as the identity of its owner, thus the sender of the letter on which the seal is stamped.

The concept of identity in relation to the early Malay official letters is actually the Malay identity. The focus of this article is on early official letters issued by the government dignitaries and the kings ruling the various territories of the Malay Archipelago. Generally, they were of Muslim faith and used Malay as the main language of communication.

Tengku Luckman Sinar (1998:493-545) listed several significant characteristics to qualify an individual as having the Malay identity. They are as follows: -

- a) Believes in Islam, speaks Malay and practises the Malay custom and culture
- b) A Muslim government that upholds the Shafie School of Thoughts that places high importance on the concept of '*maufakat*' (mutual agreement)
- c) Sovereign king, and the citizens adopting the concept of "*raja adil raja disembah, raja zalim raja disanggah*" (just king is respected, while tyrant king is rejected)
- d) Believes in the Oneness of God
- e) Upholds the law to maintain peace, discipline, and prosperity for the citizen
- f) Emphasises the importance of refined manners and behaviour
- g) Places high priority on education and knowledge
- h) Emphasises the importance of "*budaya malu*" (modesty culture)
- i) Discussions and mutual consensus as the axis of social life
- j) Cordial and open towards guests
- k) Retaliates only under extreme pressure

Based on the explanations and characteristics for Malay identity forwarded by Tengku Luckman Sinar, the question now is how was the Malay identity reflected in the early Malay official letters or in the seals stamped on them?

The most important characteristics for the Malay identity are that the individual must be a Muslim, uses the Malay language in communication, and practices the Malay customs and culture. All these characteristics were very clearly reflected in the seals used during the early Malay era. Firstly, the majority of the kings and dignitaries who used seals were Muslims, as proven by their use of the word "Allah" the Muslim god's name and 'Nabi Muhammad' the Muslim prophet's name in their seals. The use of the names Allah and Nabi Muhammad in their seals prove beyond doubt that the owners were

definitely Muslims. It also symbolises the owners' love for Islam. Non-Muslims would never use these names in their seals. An example of a seal that has the names of the Muslims' god and prophet was the one stamped on a letter that Pengiran Dipaningrat of Sukadana (Borneo Barat) sent to Pengiran Ratu of Palembang.

Besides the above, another element that proves that the owner of the seal is a Muslim is the use of words borrowed directly from the Arabic language. Some seals used Arabic language in totality, while others used a mixture of the Malay and the Arabic language. This fact is apparent from the various languages used on most Malay seals, as shown in the examples below.

#### **Seals using Arabic Language:**

- a) Al-Marhum al-Sultan Ibrahim.
- b) Al-Qahar ya Qahar al Amrallah A'dilu al-Sultan Mohammad Fadl.
- c) Billah Hita'ala al-watiq al-Sayid al-Muhammad Zain Ibn Abdul Rahman al-Kudsi.

#### **Seals using both Arabic and Malay:**

- a) Al-Watiq Billah Raja Muda al-marhum Fisabilillah.
- b) Al-Watiq Billah paduka Raja Kelantan Waahsanahu Ibnu al-Marhum al-Sultan...
- c) Al-Watiq Billah Paduka Seri Sultan Abu Bakar Tajuddin Ibn al-Marhum Sultan Umar Alimuddin Zalallah fil alam.

Since the early days, the Malays have been known to hold strongly onto their customs and culture. This is reflected by the way seals were used in the traditional Malay society. Only the dignitaries and the royalties were permitted to use seals in their letters. This was not a law, but a custom accepted and practised by the whole Malay community. Thus, one will never find any letter written by members of the general public with seal marks on it. This is also a proof of the Malays' absolute

adherence to their customs and traditions established during that era.

## II. METHODS

This study uses a comparative approach between the letters in a different sources from British Library, the National Library of Malaysia and collection from Indonesia. Seal of these letters are digitalized first and then the image can be view to get all the information contained in the seal. This step must be done because the seal is too small and difficult for the naked eye to read all the information contained therein. When all information has been able to read through the computer, analysis and comparison could be done as well as the characteristics of each seal.

## III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In brief, the first characteristic of Malay identity was clearly reflected in their seals and the way they were used. Many may not be fully aware of this fact; nevertheless it is implicitly incorporated in the seals which are very beautiful and pleasing to the eyes. There are other characteristics of the Malay identity found in the official letters besides those explained by Luckman Sinar. These other characteristics are very different from his. They are as follows:

- a) Shape of the seal
- b) Illumination of the seal
- c) Artistic style of the writing

Each of these characteristic are discussed below to disclose the identity incorporated in the seals used by the senders in their letters.

### Shape of the Seal

The first characteristic indicating the identity of the sender is the shape of his seal. Generally, the shape of a particular seal used by an individual dignitary or a king symbolised him as a person since the shape was his personal choice. The seal's engraver and calligrapher merely forwarded their suggestions for the dignitaries or kings to consider. The owner exercised exclusive right

in the final selection of shape and writing style of his seal. Once a seal was made, it became the official seal of the dignitary or king and would be used throughout his lifetime. It would be used to endorse his letters as well as for some other similar purposes.

In short, the seal that was selected and created for a particular ruler or king will remain his permanently, and will usually be used as the official seal of the government under his rule. The specialty here is that, upon the demise of the king, his successor will retain the shape of the official seal, and this practice will continue from one generation to another. Modifications were often made to the official seal according to the wishes of the new rulers but the shape chosen by the original owner will be retained. Changes made were limited to aspects other than shape, such as changing or adding the calligraphy and illuminations. This practise continued through time, or with each appointment of a new ruler. Usually the new king retained the original shape of the seal while at the same time introduced some changes to some other parts or aspects of the seal.

Variations in the shape of seals were true indicators of the different personalities of the letter senders. It also symbolised the extent of his power or authority. The use of the seals on official letters also helped to ensure smooth-running of the related commercial or other similar important official dealings. This was the role and extent of importance of the seals to their owners. Since they were accepted as genuine representatives of their owners in endorsing decisions and agreements, the seals were well guarded and kept with utmost care.

From the cultural point of view, the Malay seals were said to be among the most beautiful compared to other seals known. Their uniqueness and specialty were in the aspects of their shapes and carving or engraving which were either embedded or embossed. A seal owner would take extra care to ensure that the most beautiful shape and engraving

were chosen for his seal, since they would be seen as a reflection of his own personality and identity. It is interesting to note that not a single seal has the same engraving with another. Though they may have the same shape, the writing styles and calligraphic designs used are totally different. Beside these, the owner would only choose appropriate wordings that befit his status and at the same time could be fitted onto the small seals. The wordings would be very carefully chosen to truly convey very pleasing and significant meanings to the owners.

Undoubtedly the seal's shape is regarded highly for its role as a symbol of the owner's identity. The existence of a variety of fine and attractive shapes reflected the differences between the owners they represented. As symbols or representations of their owners, these seals also played an important role in establishing their owners' standing in terms of rank, power or authority.

### **Illumination of the Seal**

Illumination or decoration is the second element of identity represented by the seals. Many people are not aware of the variety of decorations used in seals. Many researchers also are not fully aware that such small seals could conceal multitudes of patterns and decorations because these decorations created by the seals' engravers, are too tiny and fine to be easily visible to the naked eyes. When a seal is enlarged, one will be astonished to find a manifestation of numerous beautiful decorations. The small space was successfully utilised to accommodate a variety of elements to produce several very beautiful and attractive decorations.

An interesting example of a seal with attractive decoration is the one owned by Paduka Seri Sultan Ratu Ingalaga from Jambi which he used in his letter to F. Light in year 1776. This seal was engraved with the words "al-watiq billah al-makin Sultan Mas'ud Badarudin". The most interesting aspect about this seal is the illumination selected by His Royal Highness, the owner. This is one of

the most unique Malay seal since its decoration included the figures of animals, two elephants and two wolves. Generally, in the Malay decorative art, the use of living creatures is forbidden, but obviously His Royal Highness violated this practice. The question is why did he disregard this custom? No one seems to know the reason or his intention in using those icons.

Further observation of the various aspects of the owner's identity disclosed that Sultan Mas'ud also blatantly disregarded the relevant existing rules in the creation of his seal to highlight his identity as a ruler. His Royal Highness used the figures of elephants and wolves to ensure that other people knew his identity even-though during that era such symbols would never be used as decoration. His Royal Highness's zealousness to emphasise his identity as a king made him bold enough to act contrary to the norms of the society of that era.

In other examples, images that were used in the illumination of seals included the *tanjung* and lotus flowers, leaves, *awan larat* and *sulur* designs, as well as others that convey special meanings and interpretations in the Malay community. A seal's owner would normally use decorative elements that were commonly accepted by the community to reflect their sense of community spirit. Selection of decoration depended on the intention of the owner, since each one of the motives or decorative elements have their respective special meanings.

### **Calligraphy or Artistic Writing Style**

Generally most Malay seals used Arabic language or a mixture of Malay and Arabic language. However, all of them used the Arabic script. The contents of the writing included elements such as the owner's personal name, his bestowed title(s), date, place, and Islamic phrases that have specific meanings. These details were neatly engraved on each seal using various writing styles depending on the skills of the engraver. The intricacies and beauty of the calligraphy

on a seal reflects the skills of the engraver and calligrapher employed by the king or dignitary who owns the seal.

In Malay seals, the use of the phrase “al-Watiq billah dan zil Allah fi al-alam” was exclusively used by the royalties. The dignitaries usually used only their personal names, and seldom include their bestowed titles on their seals. This shows that the choice of words or phrases to be included in the seals depended on the status and rank of the owner. Members of the public were conscious of the fact that not every word could be used in the seals, and they conformed to this un-gazetted rule. Below are examples of names used by dignitaries on their seals:

- a) Siti Sabariah Cahaya Alam Ada Negeri Kedah Darul Iman
- b) Laksamana Paduka Raja
- c) Orang Kaya Saudagar Raja Di Negeri Kedah Darul Iman
- d) Bendahara Muda Negeri Perak Darul Ridwan

Viewed from the aspects of personal identity and community culture, the names as listed above were only used by dignitaries and their family members, and not by kings or sultans. For kings, the wordings used were either praises or some other beautiful phrases that were exclusively sanctioned for them. This special treatment for the kings is one of the sacrifices made by the citizen for their rulers. Beside this, the Malay community in the early days placed high importance to the custom of “*budaya malu*” (modesty culture) and would never create a situation where the rulers were insulted or degraded just because their subjects possess seals that were more special or were of higher quality. This fact that kings could use a variety of bestowed titles and accolades, while dignitaries used their own names only was sufficient to show that they enjoyed special privileges.

In short, the kings continued to retain their identity through the selection of beautiful

phrases for their seals, while the dignitaries on the other hand merely used their own names. This shows that the concept of loyalty to the king continued to prevail strongly in the hearts of the Malay community, and this was manifested in their seals. Perhaps many are still not fully aware of the existence of the information concealed in the seals. The fact is the Malay seals contain substantial information that is manifested implicitly. This information is valuable and therefore should be uncovered and made available to the society.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

In the early or traditional Malay society, the seal was a symbol of power, authority and personal identity of the person who owns it. It did not only carry a message of power but also represented the symbol of sovereignty and integrity of the owner. The seals were therefore kept with utmost care and not used indiscriminately. Due to its role and purposes, when a seal’s owner passed away his seal will also cease to exist.

What remains are only the seal marks on the letters (on which they were stamped). These should be researched and the findings made available to the public so that people are informed of all facts related to the seals and their special role in society of the past Malay era. As a race who once owned the most beautiful seals in history, we (the Malays) seemed to have lost the interest and initiative to carry out research on them. Perhaps it is time we should ask ourselves the question, “Who better to revive and sustain our culture, if not ourselves?” We should never depend on others to study our seals for fear that they may come up with many inaccurate interpretation. Thus, we should take joint responsibility to carry out research on our culture which is on the verge of disappearing.

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