ABSTRACT

Malay manuscripts which are inherited from generations past, represent an important part of the cultural wealth of the Malay people, embodying their thinking and culture, and are recognized as well as accepted as the documentary heritage of the nation. Manuscripts residing in the homes of individuals are sometimes inaccessible for tracing and documentation and present a challenge in building a comprehensive database. There is also an urgent need to conduct a study and transliterate Malay manuscripts as it is written in old Malay language. Information and communication technology enables manuscript to be accessed globally. Institutions are therefore urged to collaborate in implementing digitization projects at regional level. Cooperation is also welcomed in areas of preservation of non-paper based manuscripts. It is envisaged that regional cooperation will endorse the significance of Malay manuscripts and affirm its place as an important source of research and information in the dawn of a new era.

INTRODUCTION TO MALAY MANUSCRIPT

Documentary heritage represents a large proportion of the world’s cultural heritage. It is subject to deterioration and damage due to its fragile condition. It is crucial that preservation be implemented before it reaches its final stage of destruction. Malay manuscript has been recognised as an important documentary heritage of the nation to be preserved for accessibility and for reference for future generations.

Malay manuscript is defined as a handwritten document in the Malay language which surfaced in the beginning of the fourteenth century and ended in early twentieth century with the coming of the west and the introduction of printing machines. During the early period manuscript was written on palm leaves from the lontar palm and the nipah palm, bamboo, vellum and tree bark. Manuscript writing tradition using palm leaves as writing material became less popular with the introduction of paper during the Islamic period. With the coming of the English in the region in the seventeenth century, paper from Europe, mainly from England, Italy and Holland became more easily available. Apart from European paper, oriental paper from Arabia, India and China surfaced in the market. The Arabic script being the language of Islam, found itself being used as the main vehicle to express the Malay language in the written form. Hence, the term Jawi was born and adopted as the script used in the Malay world in expressing their literary skill. The earliest evidence of Malay written in the Arabic script closely identical to our present Jawi comes from a Terengganu inscription dating between 1303 and 1387.

For writing material the Malays used pen or kalam derived stem of plants of which the most commonly used were kalam resam and kalam kabong. Kalam resam was made from the stem of fern resam (gleichenia linearis) and the kalam kabong was made of a black hard bristle from various palmace plants namely enau or kabong (arenga pinnata) and gomuti palm (borassus gomuti). As for the ink, it was locally manufactured from the ingenuity of the Malays. It was largely made from oily or torch lamp black or burnt charcoal mixed with gum and honey. Another source of ink was from a local fruit called maja kani. Coloured ink was extracted from certain plants such as water hyacinth for purple ink, the fruit rind of mangosteen for brown ink and safflower for red. The luxuriant colours from the fauna enhanced the beauty of illuminated manuscript.

Since the early days when the Malays first learned how to write and particularly during the period when Islam penetrated into the Malay world, thousands of Malay manuscripts were produced covering a wide range of subjects spanning from literature, history, religious Islamic teachings, medicine, to court customs and beliefs reflecting the rich cultural heritage and high intellectual attainment of the Malays. The data locked up in them offer an abundance of knowledge for a proper understanding of the cultural history of the Malay world. The manuscripts were considered as a prized collection to the European collectors. It was given as gifts by the Malay rulers to the colonials as a symbol of friendship. Malay scribes were paid to copy valuable works of literature for their keep. Many of the early manuscripts, some of which are of considerable importance and interest, were transported to the country of origin of the colonials and eventually found themselves housed and preserved in repositories outside the Malay world.
ESTABLISHMENT OF THE CENTER FOR MALAY MANUSCRIPTS

Recognising the need to preserve the intellectual and cultural heritage of the Malays, The Center for Malay Manuscripts was formally set up as a division in the National Library of Malaysia in 1985. Specific functions, as below, are laid out to ensure its role and effectiveness:

i. To trace and acquire Malay manuscripts irrespective of forms from within and outside the country

ii. To document Malay manuscripts, maintain a union catalogue and publish bibliographies

iii. To provide facilities for the storage, preservation and reproduction of Malay manuscripts

iv. To provide facilities for research

v. To disseminate knowledge available in Malay manuscripts through publications, research and exhibition activities.

TRACING AND DOCUMENTATION

Since its implementation, the tracing and acquisition of Malay manuscripts have been actively implemented. Malay manuscripts are acquired consciously as part of National Library's collection development policy. The Center started with a nucleus collection from the National Museum. Since its inception, it has grown from strength to strength. With sufficient funds for acquisition and dedicated staff it now has 2940 copies of Malay manuscripts in its collection, the biggest collection of Malay manuscripts housed under one institution. However, Malay manuscripts residing in the homes of individuals are sometimes inaccessible for tracing. The royal and religious families who owns a considerable collection of Malay manuscripts regard them as a family heirloom passed down from generations and tend to be protective of them and hence are reluctant to allow viewing by others. This present a challenge to The Center in building a comprehensive database on Malay manuscripts in the country. Campaigns to change the mindset of the private collectors and the general public are being implemented by The Center with regard to the importance of manuscripts as a documentary heritage that should be preserved and made accessible not only nationally but also globally.

Publication of a booklet on the importance of manuscripts entitled Malay Manuscript: intellectual heritage of the Malays and production of a CD-ROM entitled Malay Manuscript: a splendid heritage are some of the steps carried out this year in achieving this goal. They are distributed widely to related institutions such as schools, mosques, royal offices, individuals throughout the nation. Aggressive campaigns in the form of continuous publicity in the media and continuous exhibitions throughout the year will send message to the public of its importance.

Tracing of Malay manuscripts is not only restricted within the country, but also covers to countries known to have collection of the materials collected through the process of history, which were acquired as gifts or bequests. The coming of the Europeans to the East, some of whom develop an interest in Malay manuscripts, had a positive effect to the survival of the Malay manuscripts by being taken back by them to be preserved in European repositories. Tracing activity has successfully been done in The Netherlands (1985), West Germany (1988), France (1990), Library of Congress, U.S.A. (1990), Singapore (1991) and South Africa (1998). Next destination is Australia which will be covered this year.

The result of this activity is the documentation of the manuscript collection and publication of a catalogue of each country. Microfilm copies of the manuscripts documented are then made available at The Center for the convenient of researchers without the necessity to travel to the country owning the manuscripts to examine them. However, tracing activity in neighbouring countries of Southeast Asia has not been reached. Undoubtedly institutions in these countries maintain a collection of Malay manuscripts, due to similar culture and the existence of Malay community in the region. No matter how small the collection is, tracing and documenting them is a task that needs attention. It is hoped that institutions with Malay manuscript collection will open their doors and inform The Center of its existence and give permission to document them. Regional cooperation and support amongst the countries in the importance of building a comprehensive information on Malay manuscripts in the region, and eventually in the world, is lauded. Documentation of each manuscript will dig significant titles which may have been piled together with other manuscripts, usually mistaken for Arabic manuscript.

PRESERVATION

It is possible that the manuscripts in private collections are disintegrating at an alarming rate, some reaching its final stage of survival, even though they are seldom being read or referred. Manuscript collection in institutions which neglect preservation also experience impending damage. Deterioration factors are many. It may be due to the acid embrittlement of the paper, unsuitable storage, attacks from pests or even sheer negligence of human and mishandling. Paper deterioration results from a combination of many factors. Different environment has different effects of deterioration of the paper changing its colour to yellow, crumble between covers, or even disintegrate turning it to bits and pieces. The ink used also deserves to be mentioned as part of the culprit. The tropical climate experience by countries of Southeast Asia region further aggravates the deterioration process.
However, paper acidity, ink, pests and the natural environment are only some of the factors which cause disintegration and damages to the manuscripts. Human negligence and ignorance of preservation procedures and standards are also to be blamed. It is well known that manuscripts stored in damp and hot and badly ventilated storage areas are prone to pests, bacteria and fungi growth. Unfortunately, this is the normal condition of storage for manuscripts in private collections. Preserving Malay manuscripts in the hands of families pose a problem. They are usually stacked in cupboards or left lying in dark corners unattended, mistakenly regarded as an old reading material of no significant importance upon the death of their owners years before. Left in such a state it becomes prey to household pests of which are favourites of cock roaches and silverfish. The current owners who are ignorant to its value should be approached and persuaded to part with their precious heritage, either as bequest or surrendering ownership through purchase by interested institutions, for purpose of proper preservation, documentation and future access. It may be a huge sacrifice on the part of the new owners but one that will be appreciated by posterity.

Awareness of the impending total destruction of the manuscript is not sufficient. If the problem of preservation persists and not addressed immediately, we may lose the documentary heritage of the nation through indifference in attitude towards these fragile but valuable material. We need to develop effective means to preserve the manuscripts and to prevent further deterioration. Libraries which have been bestowed the responsibility to collect this precious material should include conservation and preservation aspect in their collection management policy. This involves conservation expertise and cultivation of a love towards these old, dirty and fragile looking documents. Proper storage conditions which are conducive to prolong the lives of the manuscripts are prerequisites of conservation. The best storage situation is creating an area with optimum temperature of 20°-25°C (68°-77°F) and humidity at 55-65 %, if possible, with 24 hours air-conditioning. The recently acquired manuscripts are fumigated prior to storing them with the rest of the collection as a preventive measure of spreading destructive agents. After controlling the temperature and humidity level, it is vital that the manuscript is placed in an acid-free box as an assurance of delaying or even stopping the deterioration process. Manuscripts which show signs of disintegration should immediately be repaired and strengthened.

Proper handling is another factor which can prolong their life span. Researchers should be made aware of the correct method of handling manuscript, if the use of original copy is necessary. Microfilming the collection is another way in preserving the information. It is advisable that each manuscript acquired by any institution be reproduced in a microfilm copy, one to be kept as master copy and another one for reference use. By doing so, the original manuscript can be prevented from repeated reference as it will hasten damage through constant handling. At the same time, it is also preferable to produce paper print from the microfilm to meet the demands of researchers.

The Center is fortunate that the National Library of Malaysia has within its organization a Preservation and Reprography Division which is equipped with the necessary machinery for preservation work and staff who are trained and skilled in conservation of paper-based manuscripts. The preservation work that is being practiced in-house are according to international standards of preservation. This is acknowledged by book pathology specialists from the Institute of Pathology of Books, in Rome, Italy. Five resource persons, including the Director, Professor Carlo Federici conducted a conservation workshop at the National Library last year. Every manuscript acquired will be treated and repaired to ensure its longevity, apart from producing it in microfilm copy for reference. The Center for Malay Manuscripts regard preservation as an important function that should be given priority with the ultimate aim of making the materials available for use and ensuring this documentary heritage is here to stay. But this task of preservation can only be accomplished successfully through the combination of vision, commitment, conscience and a sense of responsibility towards preserving the national intellectual heritage by the institutions concerned and implemented with full dedication by the staff who have been assigned to be custodian of this material.

As mentioned earlier, manuscripts in the pre-Islamic period were written on palm-leaves, treebarks, parchments and vellums. They pose a unique problem of preservation. The palm-leaves are easily decayed and damaged. Writing on material apart from paper is not a common tradition practiced by the Malays in Malaysia. However, The Center has acquired a few examples to be added to the collection of Malay manuscripts, more for its intrinsic value rather than historical contents. Lack of expertise in treating these materials has led to their neglect. Writing on palm-leaves thrived in countries like Indonesia and Thailand and as such expertise in the proper preservation of these materials developed. Regional cooperation in the form of transfer of technology through training and attachment programmes between these countries will assist in upgrading knowledge and skill of our conservationists. Sharing of knowledge and expertise will ensure that all the documentary heritage of our nation in whatever material used for writing will be spared from disappearing through damage.

Recent efforts made by various government institutions in Thailand, Laos and Myanmar at preserving manuscripts in Buddhist temples in rural or provincial areas indicates the importance and urgency of preservation. The method adopted is field preservation which means in situ preservation using appropriate technology and basic methods of preventive preservation. The documents are not removed from the original site. Thailand has aggressively carried out preservation of its traditional manuscripts. Chiang Mai University initiated a project called The Project for the Preservation of Northern Thai Manuscripts with the support of the Government of the Federal Republic of Germany. Its aims are to restore and preserve the traditional manuscripts, promote awareness of the value of the manuscripts and to establish a model for preservation and conservation activities by setting up institutions and network among scholars, monks and the public.
A similar programme is adopted by Laos also funded by the German Government, preserving manuscripts in Buddhist monasteries and other libraries throughout Laos which started in 1992 and scheduled to end in 2002.

The onus of field preservation in Myanmar lies with the National Commission for the Preservation of Traditional Manuscripts which Another mega project carried out in the region is the International Dunhuang Project which was established in 1993 to promote the study and preservation of manuscripts and printed documents from Dunhuang and other Central Asian sites through international cooperation. Its secretariat is the British Library in the Oriental and India Office Collections. Among its objectives are to develop new techniques for the preservation of original documents, promote common standards of preservation and documentation, stimulate research and increase access and share information on the Dunhuang project through the development of an international database.

Field preservation undertaken by Thailand, Laos and Myanmar and the Dunhuang Project have proven its success in saving and restoring traditional manuscripts. The exchange of information and expertise among the leading conservationists in these countries will make it possible to work towards a collective memory of Southeast Asia that would lead to a better understanding of the region and its culture. Other countries in the region should also learn from the experiences of these three countries and appeal for international cooperation of the possibility of undertaking a similar project in areas pertinent to their nation's heritage through smart partnership. It would be fruitful that international cooperation of such kinds exchange information at regular intervals with libraries and research institutions about preservation projects undertaken.

MEMORY OF THE WORLD PROGRAMME

In respect of the preservation of manuscripts, the Memory of the World Programme launched by UNESCO in 1992 is formed aimed at focusing world attention on the need to safeguard endangered and unique library and archives collection, to make it available for future generations and to improve its accessibility globally. It also aims to stimulate a responsible approach to the sources from which our historical consciousness grows and to contribute to the general availability of information about our history and culture. The Programme also seeks to develop products based on this documentary heritage and make them available for wide distribution, while ensuring that the originals are maintained in the best possible conditions of conservation and security. It establishes and maintains a World Register identifying documentary heritage of international, regional and national standard. The Register, a comprehensive list of documents, manuscripts, oral traditions, library and archive holdings worldwide, will be a significant document in itself, as well as an inspiration to nations and regions to identify, list and preserve their documentary heritage.

Countries in the Southeast Asia region have a rich cultural heritage and indigenous materials depicting their history and culture, also literary works embodying their intellectual thinking which is unique to our region. Submission to the World Register of these materials will enhance its status and significance to be preserved and enable it to be accessed globally. Philippine Paleographs submitted by the National Museum of Philippines is the other documentary heritage from Southeast Asia country listed in the World Register, apart from Malaysia. Individual countries are encouraged to set up their own documentary heritage register. The national register identifies the documentary heritage of the nation. It will increase awareness of the importance of the national documentary heritage and the need for a coordinated and integrated policy to ensure that the endangered documentary heritage is preserved. Group of Southeast Asia countries of similar culture may compile a regional register to list documentary heritage which is integral to their collective memory. Only through concerted efforts by all countries will the documentary heritage be retained in a condition which will enable it to be accessed by as many people in the world and passed on to future generations.

DIGITIZATION

With rapid development of information communication and technology, manuscripts can now be preserved electronically through digitization for future keep, simultaneously making it accessible globally. Many libraries are venturing into digitization project which is new and costly. Rapid changes in computer technology offers a multitude of application devices for digitization. It is crucial to study and select the appropriate technology suitable for the needs of manuscript as the manuscripts are fragile and may endanger its physical condition. The most important thing is to define the formal rules which would be world wide acceptable. Furthermore, this format must fit with the necessary standards for dissemination of data via Internet.
Regional cooperation is viable in this area of digitization. It is recommended that:

i. Institutions with Malay manuscript holdings identify manuscripts to be digitized based on the strength of their collections.

ii. Information on manuscripts digitized to be shared so as to avoid duplication of effort.

iii. Member countries participating in this cooperative project be allowed to download digitized manuscript without charge.

The National Library of Malaysia has embarked on a digitization project beginning last year. Two important titles of Malay manuscripts, Hukum Kanun Melaka and Adah Raja-raja, have been digitized and are accessible via the Internet. The Center has identified 250 titles for digitization project which is now well underway.

Digitization is only a solution for providing ease and speed of access to documentary heritage. However, owing to uncertainties about their long term survival, digitization will not generally be used as the sole preservation method. Also, there exist the unwillingness of researchers from the old school of thought to accept digital facsimile as a surrogate copy.

TRANSLITERATION

Each manuscript is unique and has its own enchantment. It is a silent witness to the intellectual thinking and cultural practice of the past generations. In it lies myriad of knowledge to be researched, studied and appreciated. However, Malay manuscript is written in an ancient grammar of the Malay language, unfamiliar to the present generations. Punctuation marks are distinctly absent making it an arduous task for the younger people reading and comprehending its contents. Universities offering Malay studies focussing on Malay traditional literature acknowledge that there is a decrease in number of graduates interested in undertaking study in this field. Scholars in this discipline may be a dying breed in the near future if this issue is not addressed seriously by academicians and other concerned bodies. It will create a vacuum in the research of Malay manuscript studies.

The Center for Malay Manuscripts introduced a Guest Scholar Programme or Mualim Tamu in 1994 in an effort to fill this vacuum and to stimulate research. The selected scholars is required to conduct a study and transliterate a copy of Malay manuscript from the collection of the Center, whereby the title and area of research is agreed upon by both parties. The result of the research which is to be undertaken for a one year period is published by the Center. The Programme has produced four publications from the work of three scholars in the field of Malay manuscript study, as below:


This year The Center has engaged another scholar to research on Malay traditional medicine. Malay manuscript on traditional medicine known as Kitab Tib ranks high as one of the most popular group of collection written. Amazing facts and information are buried in it on remedies of various diseases, the cure of which is derived from flora and fauna extracted from surrounding environment mixed with certain identified spice known to have medicinal value. It is hoped that the study and its eventual publication will provide interest to those practicing modem medicine as well as the general public to stimulate interest in traditional medicine.

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Transliteration work on manuscript per se is another form of preservation, but not a popular way. It involves hard work and sheer dedication. The qualities required to undertake this work is familiarity with Jawi script and knowledge in philology and Malay manuscript study. However, new generation in this field is hard to come by due to lack of interest in traditional and cultural studies, as compared to computer technology. Added to this situation, is the negative attitude of publishers towards publishing literary works of this kind as it does not provide high commercial value. Therefore, it is urged that publishers, be they commercial, foundations, associations or government institutions, sacrifice a high profit margin in publishing reading materials in this field for the sake of assisting the nation preserving documentary heritage and to promote interest in the study and appreciation of the intellectual heritage of past generations.
CONCLUSION

The preservation of Malay manuscripts is a responsibility and commitment not only by custodians of manuscripts but also by owners of Malay manuscripts who do not wish to part with them. Continuous attention and action in preserving them will ensure its longevity and assurance of its permanent existence. The greatest challenge for custodians of Malay manuscripts is ensuring that this fragile and invaluable material remain relevant. It is envisaged that regional cooperation and collaboration will endorse its significance and affirm its place as an important primary source of research and information in the dawn of the new era.
REFERENCES


