

MALAY INGENUITY IN THE USE OF LOCAL MATERIALS FOR THE PRODUCTION OF MALAY MANUSCRIPTS.¹

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Abstract.

Except for paper which was imported, local products had been used quite widely in the past by the Malays as writing materials. Most of the raw materials could be found easily around their compound, some even in their own dwellings. The materials normally need to be processed first before they could be used as writing materials. This paper will focus on writing surface, ink, pen, illumination and binding.

Introduction.

Malay manuscript is a heritage of the Malays of immense value. Thousands of Malay manuscripts were written over the centuries in Malay language, covering varied fields of knowledge and wisdom: belief, religion, medicine, history, literature etc. Therefore it was not surprising to find Malay manuscripts been collected in large numbers by individuals associated with colonial powers especially the British and the Dutch. Malay manuscripts have been the primary resource for the study of the Malay culture and mind. They had been collected up to the present by foreigners who are interested to study Malay culture and mind like the Europeans and lately by Koreans and Japanese. At present, there are so many Malay manuscript collections in educational institutions overseas especially libraries and museums.

The process of producing a Malay manuscript in the past was very challenging. Before a manuscript was written, suitable writing materials had to be found such as paper, ink and pen. If the materials were not available then, necessary steps need to be undertaken to make them. When all the materials for writing were at hand, then only the process of writing could start. The authors or copyists need to be patient in the course of their work. In addition, when the work of writing text was completed the sheets of papers need to be bound. In the course of writing Malay manuscripts, local ingenuity developed using materials that could be found easily around the vicinity.

Writing Surface.

After the coming of Islam to this part of the world, circa 11th century, the Malays were slowly introduced to paper, the premier writing material of Muslims. During the period Muslims produced papers in large quantity. All over the Middle East, North Africa and Spain, paper mills sprouted in large numbers. Many paper mills were set up especially starting from Samarqand, Baghdad to other parts of the Islamic world. In fact, paper was a material of commerce among the Muslim traders who plied the trade route of Asia

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through the Straits of Malacca. Slowly the old writing tradition of the Malays from the Indian era which used lontar was replaced by paper, in accordance with the Islamic tradition.

Many of the workers employed in paper mills in Muslim Spain were non Muslims from neighbouring countries. After gaining experience in paper making, a number of them returned to their homelands and set up paper mills. The first to do so was the Italians who set up a paper mill in Fabriano, Italy in 12th century. Soon after many other paper mills were built in other countries of Europe like France, Germany and The Netherlands. Paper mills in Islamic lands could not compete with papers made by non Muslims of Europe. The rapid development and success of paper mills in Europe was due mainly to the abundance of fresh water from streams as against the scarcity of water in the arid regions of Islamic lands. By 13th century, the needs for paper in the Middle East were monopolized by the non Muslim Europeans. A significant numbers of the papers used to write Malay manuscripts before 1800 AD were European papers sold to the Muslims in the Middle East. The papers were brought to the Malay Archipelago by pilgrims who went to Mecca, students and Muslim traders.

Ink and illumination.

There were numerous sources that document Malay techniques in making inks. William Marsden in his book , The History of Sumatra (p. 198) mentioned that the Malays *“write on paper, using ink of their own composition, with pens made from the twig of the anau tree”*. In another part of the book (p. 182) he remarked that *“the ink is made by mixing lamp-black with the white of egg. To procure the former, they suspend over a burning lamp an earthen pot, the bottom of which is moistened, in order to make the soot adhere to it”*. Abdullah Munsyi in his autobiography Hikayat Abdullah (p. 38) mentioned about the ink used in schools in Malacca, first by burning rice into charcoal and later mingled with pure water and strained.

Another source was the information given by an elderly to the author who himself had experience in making ink while he was a student in several *pondoks* in Kelantan and Pattani. According to him, making ink was not difficult. The most important ingredient was lamp-black that could be collected from the bottom of earthen pot or cobweb in the kitchen area of a house. Three techniques were mentioned by him namely:

- a. Lamp-black, either from cobwebs, bottom of earthenware or ash from burning activity, for the black pigment,
- b. Fruit rinds, especially mangosteen and rambutan, for luster and binding source,
- c. Cashew gum from cashew tree, for binding source,
- d. Coconut oil, to improve the flow of ink,
- e. Salt, to neutralize the odour,
- f. Water, to turn the ink ingredients into solution.

Many types of fruit rinds were used but the rinds of mangosteen and rambutan (*Nephelium Lappaceum*) were often preferred. The problem with fruit rinds was that they contained acid. Therefore fruit rinds should not be used in large quantity. It might react in due course in making the writing turn brittle and create holes in the papers.

Aside from the black ink, other colours were also made by the Malays in the past. The most popular colour was red, normally used to write Quranic verses, titles, frames decoration and illumination. Red colour was normally derived from the innermost part of brazilnut tree (sepang tree).

Pen.

Just like the ink, the Malays by tradition used materials easily available around their courtyard to make pen for writing. Two materials often mentioned in literatures namely kabung (*Arenga Pinnata*) and resam (*Gleichenia Linearis*). William Marsden mentioned that the pens used by the local Muslims in Sumatra were made from the twig of the anau tree, also known as the ijok tree (1811: 198). Relating to the material he narrated, "*it encompasses the stem of the tree, and is seemingly bound to it by thick fibres or twigs, of which the natives make pens for writing*" (1811: 88). The tree has a third name, kabung tree.

Another material used by the Malays to make pen was the stem of the resam plant. Abdullah Munsyi mentioned in his autobiography (1969: 38) that the pen used in schools in Malacca were mainly made from the resam plant. The plant chosen should not be very old or very young.

Comparatively, the pen made from anau spikelet was rather sturdy and long lasting and could be sharpened into very fine nib whereas the pen from resam plant is softer, need to be sharpened more often and difficult to make it into fine nib. Therefore if a manuscript were to have been written in fine stroke it would be quite definite that the nib was made from anau spikelet.

Binding.

The process of book making will not be complete if the collection of papers is not bound in order to protect it from human handling and the environment. From observation, not many manuscripts are bound. However, there are 2 main types of materials used for binding Malay manuscripts, namely goat skin and cloth.

There are a few manuscripts bound in goat skin. A manuscript in SOAS library, London MS 11505 entitled *Kitab Futuh al-Sham* has fragments of the original binding pasted on the new European style binding. The pasted binding is in red goatskin with beautiful blind tooling. The manuscript originated from Palembang, written by Kiai Mas Fakhruddin in 1183H/1769 AD at the request of Pangeran Ratu bin Paduka Seri Sultan Ahmad Najmuddin of Palembang. According to a note on folio 1r of the manuscript, it was taken from the palace on 28th April, 1912 AD. Another manuscript in the SOAS Library, entitled *Hikayat Dewa Mandu*, MS 37103, has the original cover still intact. It is also in red coloured goat skin, with envelope flap and beautiful blind tooling. Another manuscript in the same library, *Hikayat Mesa Dewa Indera Kesuma*, MS 37072 retain the original binding in red coloured goat skin, and blind tooling but without the envelope flap. The goat skin was pared from the inside, to make them thinner and coloured mainly in red. Most of them have envelope flaps. Goat skin is a local product and is easily available.

All the decorations on the goat skin bindings are in blind tooling, with the center piece in almond-shaped medallion and two small extensions of the medallion on the vertical axis. There are a few parallel along the borders of the covers, with one of them at least in reversed S-shaped or interlocking S-shaped stamps. At each corner of the square frame, are to be found corner pieces. The decoration of the covers was

repeated on the envelope flaps and the spine of the covers. Both the left and right sides of the cover were decorated equally. The decorations are generally in conformity with the Islamic binding tradition.

Another type of binding is cloth binding, mostly traditional batik. The bindings could be found in several manuscripts in IIUM Library, City branch. The cloths were attached to several blank sheets of papers using brownish adhesive to make them thick, probably from tree trunks.

The spine of the manuscripts was mostly sewed by link stitching, using linen thread. However, unlike Islamic binding, there were no pieces of cloth with some extensions to form hinges to be pasted over the inner part of the spine that could be attached to the front and back covers.

Conclusion.

Except for paper which was an imported product, the writing materials used by the Malays in the past were mostly made from raw materials available locally. Using their ingenuity, they were able to find the relevant raw materials and process them accordingly in order to meet their needs.

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