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## A Malay Letter to Louis XV, King of France

E.U. Kratz

### ringkasan

E.U. Kratz menyampaikan di sini dan memberi penjelasan sebuah surat dari Sultan Johor Abdul Jalil Riayat Syah kepada raja Louis XV. Surat yang ditulis dalam bahasa Melayu itu disimpan dalam Perpustakaan Nasional di Paris bersama dengan terjemahannya secara bebas dalam bahasa Perancis moderen. Sebuah ceritera dari seorang pedagang Scotland Alexander Hamilton dapat menempatkan kembali surat tersebut dalam sejarah : surat tersebut disampaikan pada tahun 1719 oleh Sultan Johor kepada kapten kapal Perancis Villaumont Gardin, di Trengganu •di mana Sultan tersebut mengungsi. Beliau meminta kepada raja Perancis akan senjata dan bahan peledak, akan tetapi rupanya hal tersebut tidak ada kelanjutannya.

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## A MALAY LETTER TO LOUIS XV, KING OF FRANCE

by E.U. KRATZ

In his well-known book *A new account of the East Indies* <sup>(1)</sup> the Scottish country-trader Alexander Hamilton mentions a visit he paid to Sultan Abdul Jalil Riayat Syah of Johor when he was a fugitive in Trengganu in 1719. Hamilton, who roamed about South-East Asia between the years 1688 and 1723 and who had been acquainted with the sultan for more than 25 years, on this occasion found him in a very pitiable situation. Sultan Abdul Jalil Riayat Syah Ibni Bendahara Seri Maharaja Tun Habib, once a *bendahara* himself, who had become sultan-elect when the last direct descendant of the rulers of Malacca, Sultan Mahmud of Johor, had been murdered in 1699, had been driven from his capital in Johor <sup>(2)</sup>. In 1717 the sultan, according to Hamilton <sup>(3)</sup> a very pious and superstitious man whose claim to the throne had not been undisputed, was overthrown by Raja Kecil, a princeling from Sumatra who claimed to be a natural son of Sultan Mahmud. Sultan Abdul Jalil had to flee and found refuge in Trengganu. There he stayed till 1721, then removing to Pahang where after a short interval he was murdered by Raja Kecil's men. Little is known about the sultan's stay in Trengganu and Pahang, and the Malay manuscripts <sup>(4)</sup> differ even in their accounts of the way he died.

Hamilton however has to report that in 1719 the exiled Sultan, despite continous fear for his life, was still eager to regain his realm. A request for military assistance had been turned down by the Dutch authorities and now he tried by other means to achieve his aim, telling Hamilton "he would be glad if the *English* would settle in his Dominions, and fortify what Places they pleased, and that he would willingly come under their Protection" <sup>(5)</sup>. Hamilton continues: "There happened to come a *French* Ship thither at that Time, being bound to *China*. The

King gave the Captain and me an Invitation to Dinner, and, after we had regaled ourselves, we entred on a Discourse of the miserable State of a Country under the Malignancy of a civil War. He asked us, if such Calamities had happened to *England* or *France*. We assured him there had been often such Distempers among us, but that when the Disease was cured, our State became as strong and vigorous as ever.

He had several Times askt me, if I thought the *English* might be persuaded to settle a Colony in his Country, that *Pahaung* might be made a Place of great Trade, if there were Shipping and Stock to carry off the Pepper and Tin which that Country alone could produce. I told him, I could give him no Encouragement to believe they would.

He then despairing of getting an *English* Colony settled, proposed to Mr. *Pedro-Villamont Garden*, who commanded the *French* Ship, if he thought the *French* Nation might be induced to settle in his Dominions, and the *French* Gentleman gave him Hopes that the King of *France* might be induced to accept of his Friendship, and settle a Colony, providing he would certify his Request by a Letter, which the King of *Johore* readily agreed to. It was written in the *Malayan* Language, and translated by a *Chinese* into *Portugueze*, and I translated it from that language into *English*. The Original and the *English* Translation were delivered to the *French* Captain, but I never heard of it since.”<sup>(6)</sup>

If we turn to the Malay sources for confirmation of this report, we will be disappointed. Neither Hamilton nor the French Captain, nor the sultan's letter to the king of France are mentioned in any of the known sources. But confirmation can be found elsewhere. What we can assume to be the Malay letter mentioned by Hamilton still exists and has been preserved at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. Although Hamilton's English translation seems to be lost, a contemporary French 'translation' is still attached to the letter.

Apparently, the letter did not impress the French king, Louis XV, and this is not the place to ponder what would have happened if-. The historical role of the French in the Malay world has been discussed elsewhere<sup>(7)</sup>. This letter is of interest for other reasons as well. Original and translation show differences which cannot be explained easily. One might of course argue that some of the discrepancies between original and translation result from the fact that this letter had been translated several times by different persons: by a Chinese from Malay into Portuguese, by a Scotsman from Portuguese into English and by a Frenchman from English into French. However the similarities and divergences are far too significant to be explained away by this argument.

If we look at the transliterated original (appendix 1) we find a letter from ruler to ruler which in its outer form shows no signs of

submissiveness. The self-esteem of the sultan has not suffered by the fact that he is not in full command of his kingdom and that he has to live far from his capital (a trifle he forgets to mention) and that, according to all sources, he is without any real power. If we compare the structure of this letter with what Wilkinson has written about Malay letter-writing<sup>(8)</sup>, we find that the *termaktub*, i. e. certain stereotyped closing words, is missing; so is the *alamat*, the address at the end of the letter. *Kepala* (letterhead), *cap* (seal), *puji-pujian* (eulogies) and *perkataan* (the actual text) in no way differ from their usual form in such letters. The *puji-pujian* seem rather brief – considering the rank of the addressee one might expect something more than just *datang kepada*, but *kepala* and position of the *cap* show the proper form of collegial respect. To summarize the *perkataan* (see translation, appendix 2); Sultan Abdul Jalil requests Louis XV to supply him with much-needed ammunition and guns, in exchange for which he promises free trade to the French captain and to the French ship which he expects to bring the goods wanted. The repetition of this request for help can be taken as an indication of its urgency and of the seriousness of the sultan's offer. Yet when we look at the French translation (appendix 3) it becomes obvious that this cannot be an original translation – even considering its rather complicated genesis and the need to write in a style which is both understandable and acceptable to an absolute ruler of Louis XV's standing. Unfortunately the English translation no longer seems to exist so that our interpretation is based on the Malay text only and on what Hamilton has to say about his talks with the sultan.

Many of the differences between text and French translation cannot be explained simply as matters of style. Nowhere in our Malay letter is there any passage which could be translated as "derniers malheurs occasionné par la rebellion de partie de mes sujets et la perfidie de ceux que je croiois mes amis qui ne cessent encore de m'inquieter". This as well "le peu de mutins rebels qui continuent a me troubler" is simply called *sangat kesakitan*. Whereas this still might be called 'rephrasing the original' (after all, Hamilton and the sultan talk about "diseases" which might befall a country) in the Malay letter the sultan does not ask for French soldiers and nowhere does he promise the French permission to build fortifications to protect their trade. This offer had been made to Hamilton and the English and it is not clear from his account that the same offer had been made to the French. Since we do not know whether Hamilton altered the wording of the letter – there are some resemblances between his report and the letter – it is open to conjecture which of the two made this change. With regard to the last paragraph of the French letter however there is no doubt about its author. It must have been written by Villaumont

Gardin and it is probable that he added these sentences to arouse the king's curiosity and to impress upon the king the fact that he was the trusted friend of the Malay ruler. It is speculation to postulate that even while in Trengganu Villaumont Gardin was not convinced that Louis XV would be willing to assist the sultan or that his help would prove of value (after all, the captain was on his way to China and it would have taken him at least another 18 months to get to China, return to France and be back in Trengganu), but it is certain that with this letter he tried to improve his own business fortunes. To be received in audience by the king of France was not every man's luck and a letter of the kind he prepared (assuming that he withheld the English translation) must have seemed as good an introduction as one could think of. However, whether Villaumont Gardin succeeded in this aim it is not possible to establish; we have no other information about the fortunes of this trader. Little is known of the history of this letter after it had been received by the court. In about 1852 it received the stamp of the BIBLIOTHÈQUE IMPÉRIALE; the old registration number quoted by Cabaton<sup>(9)</sup> must have been given to it between 1898 and 1903. Voorhoeve<sup>(10)</sup> describes the letter in his revised catalogue of the collection as follows: "Lettre du sultan 'Abduljalil. "Sultan de Johor, Pahang et dépendances" à Louis XV. Une traduction contemporaine est jointe à cette lettre malaise.

XVIII siècle. Écriture neshki. Papier européen, 440×375, 11 l. et un sceau noire. Ancien numéro: Malais-Javanais 185."

The paper used for the Malay letter originally was not a separate plain sheet but had been taken from a larger book and cut. This is still to be seen from the edges, its fold and the holes for the thread which holds the paper together. Its watermark could not be dated precisely, similar watermarks of the *Fleur-de-Lis* - pattern<sup>(11)</sup> show however that this mark was quite common in the period concerned. The letter bears no date, but with Hamilton's help the actual year of the letter's composition has already been established.

The upper half of the sheet bears only the *kepala kaulu'l-hakk* (the saying is true) and in its lower right corner is affixed the seal of the sultan. The *cap* has a circular shape, is black (its inscription being white) and is enclosed by a kind of wreath.

The seal reads :

Sultan  
Abdul Jalil Riayat  
Syah zill'llahi fi'l-alam  
Ibni Bendahara Seri  
Maharaja Habib,

"Sultan Abdul Jalil Riayat Syah, Shadow of God on Earth, Son of Bendahara Seri Maharaja Habib".

In the upper left corner of the sheet we find the handwritten note *Malais 185*.

On the second half of the sheet we find the text of the letter (see facsimile). Due to the fact that the letter must have been folded in the middle the shape of the seal has rubbed off on to the upper right corner of that part of the sheet, although originally the letter was rolled as can be seen from the black stains on its reverse.

The French translation is written on three and a half unnumbered pages, now attached to the Malay original. Its handwriting is that characteristic of official documents. It is quite obvious that this is not just a hasty scribbled translation, but a text carefully written out. In the upper left corner of the top page is a handwritten *No. 15* which seems contemporary, although no explanation can be given, and in the middle of that page again we find the stamp mentioned above.

The language of the Malay letter does not differ from that used in our known Johor-texts. Noteworthy is *pinta* on line five. Peculiarities in spelling with one exception (*ketidakan*, line 9) have been restricted to non-Malay words. The consistent and 'correct' spelling of the name of *Louis Quinze Roi de France et de Navarre* seem to indicate the eagerness of the writer to get this name right. The same cannot be said about 'Pedro' Villaumont Gardin whose family name had to be conjectured from our Western-language sources.

The spelling used for this transliteration is EYD. <sup>(12)</sup>

## NOTES:

1. Edinburgh 1727, 2 vols.
2. For a detailed study of this period see Andaya, L.Y., *The kingdom of Johor, 1641-1728*, London 1975
3. Hamilton, op.cit. vol. 2, pp. 97/98
4. see Kratz, U., *Pro- und Antibuginesische Texte zur Geschichte Johors*, Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkekunde, 130. 2 & 3, Leiden 1974
5. Hamilton, op.cit. vol. 2, p. 155
6. id. pp. 155/156

7. see Reid, A., *The French in Sumatra and the Malay World, 1760-1890*, Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkekunde 129. 2 & 3, 1973
8. Wilkinson, R.J., *Notes on Malay letter-writing*, in Winstedt, R.O., *Malay Grammar*, Oxford 1957, p. 183 ff.; Newbold, M., *Political and statistical account of the British settlements in the straits of Malacca*, London 1839, 2 vols., gives basically the same description (vol. 2 p. 340 ff.): Dulaurier, E., *Lettres et pièces diplomatiques écrites en malay*, Paris 1845, relies heavily on Newbold's work.
9. Cabaton, A., *Catalogue sommaire des manuscrits indiens, indochinois et malayo-polynésiens*, Paris 1912, p. 265 no. 223. I am very grateful to the Keeper of Oriental Manuscripts, Bibliothèque Nationale, Mlle M.-R. Séguay, for the information provided on this manuscript by letter of March 1, 1974.
10. Voorhoeve, P., *Les manuscrits malais de la Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris, catalogue révisé*, Archipel 6, 1973, p. 64, manuscript *Mal.-Pol.* 223.
11. Heawood, E., *Watermarks*, Hilversum 1950, no. 1781 dated 1686 and no. 1816 dated 1727.
12. My sincere thanks go to Dr. Russell Jones for his advise and assistance.

## Appendix 1: Transliteration

(1) surat kasih serta tulus dan ikhlas serta dengan suci hati selagi ada peredaran cakrawala matahari dan bulan menerang alam sa'adah (2) ini iaitu daripada Sultan Abdul Jalil Syah Riayat zill Allah fi'l-alam yang diatas tahta kerajaan dalam negeri Johor dan Pahang serta dengan segala (3) daerah takluknya sekalian datang kepada Louis Quinze Roi de France et de Navarre ialah yang artawan dan darmawan lagi setiawan yang meneguhkan setia muapakat (4) dengan segala sahabatnya karib dan baid ialah yang masyur wartanya kepada medan peperangan di laut dan di darat lagi dengan kemenangan dan kesenangan maka masyurlah (5) wartanya itu kepada segala negeri kecil dan besar maka beta pinta kepada Allah subhanahu wa ta'ala Tuhan segala alam lanjut umur dan banyak beroleh untung kebajikan lagi dalam (6) sehat dan afiyat kemudian dari itu ada pun kapitan Pedro Villaumont Gardin itu ia singgah ke Trengganu mendapatkan beta hendak bersahabat dengan beta hendak (7) berniaga dalam Trengganu inilah maka beta memberi surat kepada Louis Quinze Roi de France et de Navarre kalau hendak berniaga dalam Trengganu barang dagangan yang ada (8) dalam Trengganu itu beta tolong charikan kemudian dari itu jikalau ada kasih serta tolong Louis Quinze Roi de France et de Navarre akan beta<sup>2</sup> minta tolong (9) barang yang ketidakan kepada beta seperti bedil dan obat bedil dan peluru, dan barang sesuatu kesakitan beta itulah sahaja beta minta tolong serta kasih (10) karena beta sangat kesakitan jikalau Louis Quinze Roi de France menyuruhkan sebuah kapal berniaga barang dimana takluk rantau di negeri Johor itu beta bebaskan (11) jikalau sampai surat maksud beta minta tolong barang yang kesakitan beta itu mau adalah tolong Louis Quinze Roi de France et de Navarre akan beta tammam.

## Appendix 2 : Translation

This letter of honest and sincere love and purity, which will last as long as the firmament with the sun are revolving and the moon is lighting up this blessed world, comes from Sultan Abdul Jalil Syah Riayat, the Shadow of God on Earth who holds reign over the lands of Johor and Pahang with all their territories to Louis Quinze, Roi de France et de Navarre, he who is wealthy and charitable and loyal, who keeps his promises and agreements with all his friends close and far, he whose fame has spread over the battlefields by sea and land with his victories and joy, whose fame has spread to all countries small and large. We pray to God, may He be praised and exalted, the Lord of the Universe, for (your) long life and that (you) might receive benefit (and remain) in good health.

Captain Villaumont de Gardin touched at Trengganu and approached Us with the intention of establishing friendship with Us in order to trade here in Trengganu. We give him this letter to Louis Quinze, Roi de France et de Navarre, (to let him know) that if he wants to trade in Trengganu, We will help him to find, whatever goods are available in Trengganu.

Now, if Louis Quinze, Roi de France et de Navarre feels any affection and kindness towards Us, We want to ask for help concerning goods which we are lacking, such as guns and gunpowder and bullets. And whatever our troubles, we only ask for your help and affection, because We have great troubles here. If Louis Quinze, Roi de France, were to send a tradingship We would exempt it (from any duties) in any part of the territory of the state of Johor, If our letter reaches you We would like to ask your help against whatever our troubles. May Louis Quinze, Roi de France et de Navarre help Us. Finis.

(Insertions in brackets are the translator's additions)

### Appendix 3: French letter

No. 15

Au Glorieux Magnanime et Illustre Roy Louis Quinze de France et de Navarre.

Je Sultan Abdull Jallill Shaa, Roy de Johore Pauhaung et Trangano avec ses Isles adjacentes, souhaite a Vôte Majesté avec toute sincerité et affection un long et heureux regne. J'ai souvent entendu parler de la puissance et grandeur de la France sans avoir eu jusqu'a present occasion de temoigner a son Roy mes respects je profite de l'occasion du Sr. Pierre Villaumont Gardin venu dans mon port de Trangano pour y négotier avec mes sujets, et par lui j'envoie cette lettre a Vôte Majesté pour lui temoigner l'estime que j'ai pour sa personne Roiale et le desir de cultiver son amitié que je cheriray éternellement.

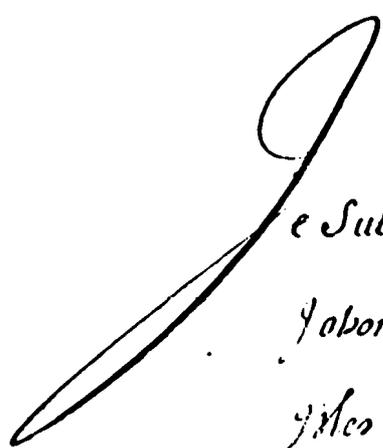
Ledit Sr. Pierre Villaumont Gardin connoist la déplorable histoire de mes derniers malheurs occasionné par la rebellion de partie de mes sujets et la perfidie de ceux que je croiois mes amis qui ne cessent encore de m'inquieter, J'ai recours a Vôte Majesté et la prie de vouloir bien masister de quelques canons et munitions de guerre et permettre aussi a ses sujets de se joindre a moy pour reduire le peu de mutins rebels qui continuent a me troubler je ne manquerai pas de temoigner a Vôte Majesté ma reconnoissance si elle veut bien m'acorder cette grace.

Tous les ports de mon Royaume et mes États seront aussi libres pour les sujets de Vôte Majesté comme pour les miens pour y faire leur commerce sans leur imposer aucuns droits ny les inquieter et si les sujets de V. M. té veulent pour la seureté de leurs effets et la conservation de leur commerce bâtir des fortifications je leur accorderai tels endrqts quils souhaiteront.

M. Pierre Villaumont Gardin peut informer Vôte Majesté des particularités du commerce de mes états et ce quils produisent et j'espere par l' amitie de Vôte Majesté de la prudence et valeur de ses sujets que le Commerce dans mes États pourra se remettre. Je prie Dieu de conserver la personne Royale de Vôte Majesté et suis.

10. 10.

Au Glorieux. Magnanime. et  
Illustre. Roy Louis quinze  
de France et de Navarre.



Je Sultan. Abdull Fallill Sbaa. Roy de  
Jobore. Saubang et Trangano avec ses  
Mes adjacentes, souhaite a V<sup>re</sup> Majeste  
avec toute sincerite et affection. un  
long et heureux regne.



J'ai souvent entendu parler de la  
puissance et grandeur de la France  
sans avoir eu jusqu'apresent occasion  
de temoigner a son Roy mes respects  
je profite de l'occasion du S. Pierre  
Villamont gardin venu dans mon port  
de Trangano pour y negotier avec mes

Sujets, et par lui j'envoie cette lettre à  
Vostre Majesté pour lui remontrer  
l'ennemy que j'ai pour sa personne Royale  
et le desir de cultiver son amitié  
que je cheriray éternellement

Le dit Sr Pierre Villamont gardien  
connoist la déplorable histoire de mes  
derniers malheurs occasionné par la  
rebellion de partie de mes sujets et  
l'apertidie de ceux que je croirois  
mes amis qui ne cessent encore de  
m'inquieter. J'ai recours à Vostre Majesté  
et la prie de vouloir bien m'assister  
de quelques canons et munitions de  
guerre et permettre aussi à ses Sujets  
de se joindre à nous pour réduire le

peu de mutins rebels qui continuent à  
me troubler j'en manquerai pas de  
temoigner à Votre Majesté ma  
reconnaissance si elle veut bien m'accorder  
cette grace.

Tous les ports de mon Royaume  
et mes Etats seront aussi libres pour les  
sujets de votre Majesté comme  
pour les miens pour y faire leur commerce  
sans leur imposer aucuns droits ny les  
inquieter et si les sujets de V. M. veulent  
pour la sureté de leurs effets et la  
conservation de leur commerce bâtir  
des fortifications j'eux accorderai  
tels endroits qu'ils souhaiteront.  
M. Pierre Guillaume Gardin

Je peu informer V<sup>ostre</sup> Majesté des  
particularités du commerce de mes États  
et ce qu'ils produisent. et j'espère par  
l'amitié de V<sup>ostre</sup> Majesté, de la  
prudence et valeur de ses Sujets  
que le Commerce dans mes États pourra  
se remettre. Je prie Dieu de conserver  
la personne Royale de V<sup>ostre</sup> Majesté  
et suis.