

LIFE&TIMES HERITAGE

Letters from Cheraiburi

The manuscript containing the correspondence of Sultan Abdul Hamid Halim Shah of Kedah has been inscribed on Unesco's Memory of the World Register, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

and officers in southern Thailand to the British Resident in Perak and the Governor of the Straits Settlements in Singapore.

Then there are the Statements of Accounts for Kedah State which include things like the allowance of members of the Royal Family and other housekeeping matters. There's also a Court Diary and other official documents.

Dr Wan Shamsudin picks a letter at random to analyse it. "Each letter begins with a sentence, right at the top, which states what the letter is about. Then, there is a salutation to tell you who the letter is from."

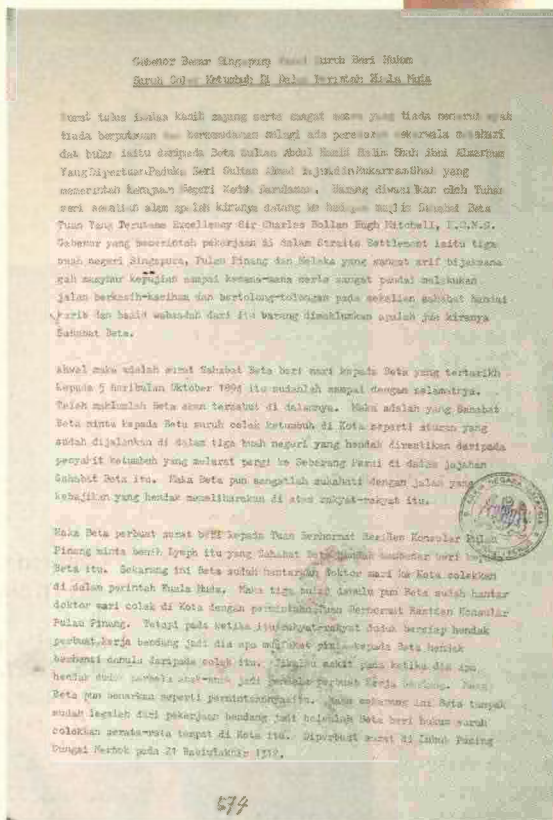
For instance, "Perhamba Phaya Reti Songkram Ramphakdi Sir Sultan Muhammad Ratana Rajmunin Tersurin Tryongse Phya Cheraiburi" explains that the letter is from the Sultan.

Cheraiburi refers to the highest mountain in Kedah, Gunung Jerai. So, Cheraiburi means Jerai State.

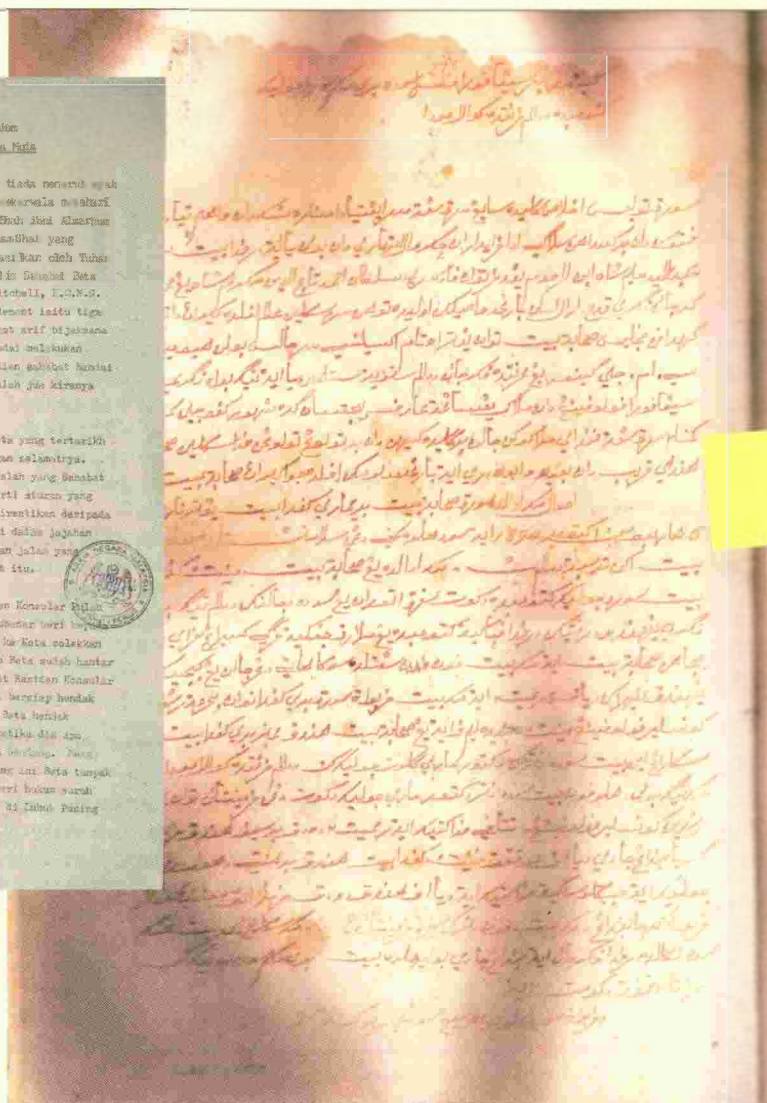
Next, comes the recipient of the letter. For instance, "Chukun Phaya Monthri Suriwong" probably refers to a minister in the court of King Chulalongkorn of Siam. If necessary, the recipient's role is added. For instance, "... yang menyelesaikan pekerjaan Negeri Senggora" refers to the recipient being in charge of the area known as Singgora (modern-day Songkhla).

Each letter ends with a date. Other than the Muslim year (Hijrah), the writer also includes the date according to the Western calendar (A.D.) or the Siamese calendar (Attarsuk Jula Sakarat, which refers to the time after the death of Buddha). To illustrate, Dr Wan Shamsudin says: "Aug 8, 1886 A.D. would be 14 Zulkaedah 1304 and also 'Isnin, 2 haribulan sepuluh, tahun anjing Attarsuk Hijrah 1248'."

There is a delicate change in



Letter from Sultan Abdul Hamid to Sir Charles Hugh Mitchell, K.C.M.G. dated 21 Rabiul Akhir 1312 (Oct 22, 1894) — in English, courtesy of The National Archives (Kedah and Perlis branch)



Letter from Sultan Abdul Hamid to Sir Charles Hugh Mitchell, K.C.M.G. dated 21 Rabiul Akhir 1312 (Oct 22, 1894) — in Jawi, courtesy of The National Archives (Kedah and Perlis branch)

the Sultan's writing style when the recipient is British. For instance, in letters to Sir Charles Bolian Hugh Mitchell, K.C.M.G, Governor of the Straits Settlements, the Sultan refers to himself as "Beta Sultan Abdul Hamid Halim Shah Ibni Almarhum Yang Dipertuan Paduka Seri Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin Mukarram Shah, yang memerintah Kedah Darulaman".

Technicalities aside, it's the contents that make this manuscript a fascinating read. For example, the letter to Sir Charles dated Oct 5, 1894 is both a letter of thanks and a report. The story goes that the Governor made a request that the Sultan's people be vaccinated. The Sultan explains that the vaccination programme could not be started earlier because the people had to work in the paddy fields. Now, three months hence, the work is complete and the



Datuk Dr Wan Shamsudin Mohd Yusof, an expert on Kedah history

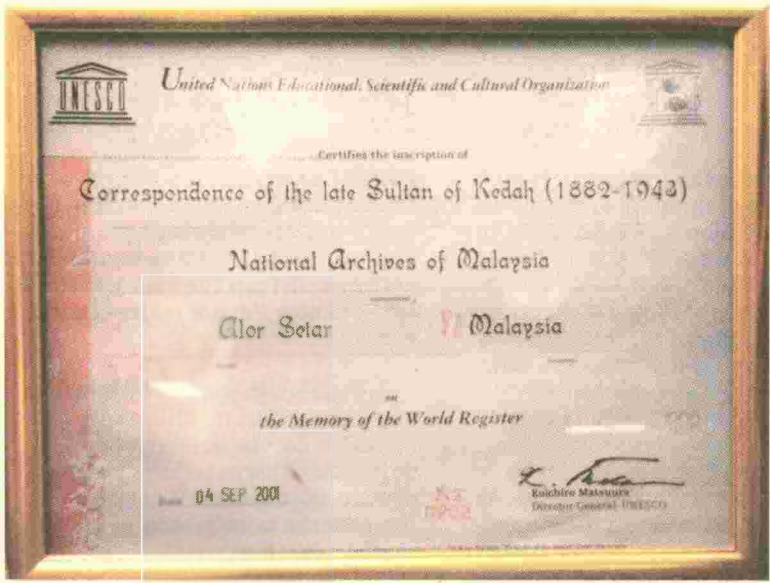
Sultan will issue a decree that all the people of Kota Setar be vaccinated.

In another letter, the Sultan appears to be writing to a minister in the Siamese Court asking that his brother studying in Bangkok, Tunku Mahmud, be given permission to return to Kedah to visit his mother. The prince is to return on the same boat that delivers the "Bunga Emas" (Kedah's tribute to Siam in recognition of Siam's suzerainty over it).

Not all the documents are serious in nature. One of the most entertaining ones is the letter the Sultan wrote to what appears to be the administrator in Songkhla. The Sultan explains that he has an English private secretary by the name of Master Hart. It is the fasting month and Master Hart, having little work, has been granted permission to visit Songkhla.

The Sultan does add: "Orang tiada bini ia baik hatipun tiada berapa senang kerana orang muda" (roughly translated to mean "without a wife, however good-hearted a man is, he'll be uncomfortable as he's young"). The letter goes on to state that Master Hart wishes to pay a lady to accompany him so that he can learn the language of the region. The Sultan craves the administrator's indulgence to allow Master Hart to bring the lady back with him to Kedah.

Dr Wan Shamsudin sums it all up when he says: "This manuscript is so unique and valuable because it's a source of history of Kedah. It gives an economic, social, political and cultural view of a time when Kedah was under the rule of the Siamese, British and Japanese."



The Unesco certificate of Memory of the World Register that marks the correspondence of Sultan Abdul Hamid is now a world heritage

ABOUT five kilometres from the Sultan Abdul Halim airport in Alor Star, you'll find the Kedah and Perlis branch of the National Archives. Inside this building, there is a manuscript containing the correspondence of Sultan Abdul Hamid Halim Shah. On Sept 4, 2001, this manuscript was inscribed on the "Memory of the World" Register of Unesco.

Sultan Abdul Hamid was the 26th Sultan of Kedah and grandfather of the Yang Di-Pertuan Agong Tuanku Abdul Halim Mu'adzam Shah.

Sultan Abdul Hamid ascended the throne on Jan 21, 1882, at 19, and ruled for more than 60 years.

One of the people responsible for creating this valuable manuscript is Datuk Dr Wan Shamsudin Mohd Yusof, an expert on Kedah history and the chairman of the History Association of Malaysia, Kedah branch. "Altogether, there are 2,951 letters, memos, notes and articles by the Sultan. They are all handwritten in Jawi," he says.

This manuscript has been transcribed into the Roman script and compiled into 14 volumes.

"There are still some letters that are missing or destroyed," he says. "With the wars, the secretariat moving from place to place and the deaths of many of the officers in charge of keeping these letters, it was bound to happen."

Nevertheless, what remains is remarkable. Part of the 14 volumes consists of correspondence of the Sultan, his Raja Muda (Tunku Abdul Aziz) and his Chief Minister (Wan Muhammad Saman). The letters are addressed to all sorts of people, from King Chulalongkorn of Siam