

## Shifting Landscapes: Mapping the Intellectual Writing Traditions of Islamic Southeast Asia

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### Summary:

For the past century, studies of the languages, literatures, history, culture and writing traditions of maritime Southeast Asia (present-day Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei and the Philippines) have been fundamentally shaped by the collections of manuscripts held in Western institutions (primarily in the UK and the Netherlands) and those formed under colonial auspices (such as the National Library of Indonesia). These collections themselves reflect the interests of their collectors, who were mainly European scholars and government officials from the early nineteenth century onwards, whose interests were focused on literary, historical and legal compositions in vernacular languages such as Malay and Javanese. Relatively little attention was paid to works on Islam, written in Arabic or in Malay and Arabic, and hence these are very poorly represented in Southeast Asian collections in institutions such as the British Library.

In 2005 the [Endangered Archives Programme](#), funded by Arcadia, commenced at the British Library. To date, 16 manuscript collections relating to Islamic Southeast Asia have been documented and digitised, located in areas ranging from Aceh to the Moluccas. Even the most cursory survey reveals that the profile of manuscripts still held 'in the field' in the archipelago, in private and mosque collections, differs radically from those held in Western collections, primarily through the very high proportion of Islamic texts, which probably account for around 95% of the manuscripts digitised.

This CDP will therefore investigate these newly-digitised collections of manuscripts from Islamic Southeast Asia, to trace how our understanding of the landscape and ecology of the intellectual writing traditions of the region must be radically redrawn, in the light of these newly-accessible primary source materials.

### Areas of Study:

The main digital BL collections to be utilised are the following EAP collections relating to Islamic Southeast Asia:

[EAP061](#) The MIPES Indonesia: digitising Islamic manuscript of Indonesian Pondok Pesantren

[EAP117](#) Digitising 'sacred heirloom' in private collections in Kerinci, Sumatra, Indonesia

[EAP144](#) The digitisation of Minangkabau's manuscript collections in Suraus

[EAP153](#) Riau manuscripts: the gateway to the Malay intellectual world

[EAP205](#) Endangered manuscripts of Western Sumatra. Collections of Sufi brotherhoods

[EAP211](#) Digitising Cirebon manuscripts

[EAP212](#) Locating, documenting and digitising: Preserving the endangered manuscripts of the Legacy of the Sultanate of Buton, South-Eastern Sulawesi Province, Indonesia

[EAP229](#) Acehese manuscripts in danger of extinction: identifying and preserving the private collections located in Pidie and Aceh Besar regencies

[EAP276](#) Documentation and preservation of Ambon manuscripts

[EAP280](#) Retrieving heritage: rare old Javanese and old Sundanese manuscripts from West Java (stage one)

[EAP329](#) Digitising private collections of Acehese manuscripts located in Pidie and Aceh Besar regencies

[EAP352](#) Endangered manuscripts of Western Sumatra and the province of Jambi. Collections of Sufi brotherhoods - major project

[EAP365](#) Preservation of Makassarese lontara' pilot project

[EAP450](#) Manuscripts of the Sri Lankan Malays

[EAP609](#) Digitising Malay writing in Sri Lanka

[EAP698](#) Digitisation of the endangered Cham manuscripts in Vietnam

As clarified above, about 95% of the manuscripts digitised are Islamic in content, with about half in Arabic and the others in Malay and Javanese. Texts include copies of the Qur'an, commentaries (Tafsir), hadith collections, works on fiqh (observance of Islamic law), Sufism, prayers, Arabic grammars, etc.

The EAP collections can be compared with the BL collection of approximately 250 Islamic manuscripts from Southeast Asia in Malay, Javanese and Bugis, comprising literary, historical and legal works, with only about 30 theological works including only a few in Arabic. Other BL collections to be used are archival records, catalogues, dictionaries and secondary sources.

There are several directions in which this CDP could be developed, depending on the expertise of the HEI partner and the interests/ skills of the PhD candidate. These include:

- Quantitative surveying of texts contained in digitised EAP collections, and a comparison with existing Western collections (consulted through published catalogues), to give a macro picture of Islamic manuscript traditions of Southeast Asia
- A focus on certain genres of texts well represented in EAP collections but almost totally absent in existing Western collections, e.g. sermons (*khutbah*) or Arabic grammars (e.g. *Ajurumiyya*) in use in madrasahs in Southeast Asia
- Digital humanities techniques applied to manuscripts digitised both through EAP and in the BL's own Digitised Manuscripts platform, e.g. for the study of palaeography or OCR projects, in the context of other developments in Arabic-script digital studies
- In-depth regional studies, as EAP has provided access to collections from areas totally unrepresented in most Western collections, e.g. Islamic manuscripts from Ambon, and Malay manuscripts from Sri Lanka
- Codicological studies, e.g. traditional methods of binding, sewing, storing and preparing writing materials, as manuscripts in Western collections have generally been rebound and traces of earlier physical lives have been obliterated. While this may sound a contradiction in terms, digitised MSS in EAP constitute an extraordinarily rich corpus for material studies of MSS.

In all these areas very little work has been done so there is a real opportunity for the PhD candidate to make outstandingly original contributions to the field.

An essential qualification for the successful candidate would be proficiency in reading Arabic script, in conjunction with one of the languages in use in Islamic Southeast Asia: preferably Malay, and/or Arabic, or Javanese. AHRC Student Development Funding might be used to support a suitable candidate towards language training in a second language, e.g. Malay.

### **Benefits and training opportunities for the student:**

Expertise available for consultation in the BL will be advice from the Lead Curator for Southeast Asia (A. Gallop), with support from curators in the Middle East and Africa sections, and from EAP and Digital Scholarship.

The BL supervisor will be able to offer a broad overview of collections of Islamic Southeast Asian manuscripts worldwide, their historical development and content profiles, and current digital initiatives.

This expertise will ideally be complemented by the HEI Supervisor, who would be able to offer support in academic methodologies, and current theoretical approaches to research in different disciplines. Ideally the collaborating supervisor at the HEI should be able to offer expertise in Islam

and Islamic intellectual and writing traditions, and a reasonable understanding of Southeast Asia. Knowledge of Arabic would be an advantage, as would be a good knowledge of textual sources used in Islamic study circles.

The student will benefit from exceptional levels of access to BL collections and staff expertise and will gain a better sense of regionally-specific collections within a broader world perspective than provided by a purely academic study.

The BL supervisor will also provide advice and expertise on the broad range of Southeast Asian writing traditions, while the student will benefit from access to the large number of curators in the Asian&African Collections team working on related, especially Islamic, regions, such as in the Middle East and South Asia.

From the EAP team the student will benefit from experience in digital project management, issues of cultural and heritage preservation, including awareness of intellectual property issues. The student will also be able to access higher-resolution images of EAP material than available through the EAP portal, where necessary for specific purposes (e.g. digital humanities techniques, or close-up study of handwriting or decorative details). The student will also receive training in cataloguing of manuscripts necessary to upgrade the metadata of the EAP material.