

# UniSZA Manuscript Digitalization Project: Experiences in Southern Thailand

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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents a study related to the tracking and digitalization of Malay manuscripts conducted by Sultan Zainal Abidin University (UniSZA) in southern Thailand, specifically in Patani, Narathiwat, and Yala. The project began in 2019 and ended on August 31, 2024, for Phase One. This region is well known for its Islamic scholarly activities in the 18th and 19th centuries. Many prominent scholars and significant works were produced in various fields of knowledge. This legacy is still preserved today in the form of handwritten manuscripts, which may deteriorate if not properly handled. This project aims to trace this invaluable heritage and digitize it for the benefit of contemporary and future generations. The paper includes the background of the study, tracking locations, manuscript lists, challenges, and hopes. The study found that several locations in southern Thailand have collections of Malay manuscripts, whether from institutions or individuals, and whether the manuscripts are complete, well-preserved, or otherwise. The manuscripts cover various Islamic disciplines such as theology, jurisprudence, mysticism, biography, and others. Many challenges and constraints were encountered during this study. However, it is optimistic that the collection of Malay scholars' manuscripts in southern Thailand is still abundant and can be traced and digitized for the benefit of all.

**Keywords:** Manuscript digitization, Malay manuscripts, Sultan Zainal Abidin University, southern Thailand, challenges and hope

## INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses a study on the tracking and digitization of Malay manuscripts in southern Thailand, particularly in Patani, Narathiwat, and Yala. The project commenced on September 1, 2019, and will conclude on August 31, 2024, for Phase One. The paper covers the background of the study, tracking locations, discovered manuscripts, challenges, and hopes.

### A. Background of the Research Project

Southern Thailand refers to the regions of Patani, Yala, and Narathiwat, which were once part of several Malay states that produced many scholars. The area, previously known as the Patani Kingdom, has existed for centuries. One of the earliest kingdoms established in Patani was the Langkasuka Kingdom.

Scholarly activities and writing became significantly important in Patani as early as the 17th century. The first pondok (Islamic educational institution) established in Patani is considered the oldest in Southeast Asia. Scholars from Patani are said to have started implementing education and spiritual training through the pondok system since the 12th century (Ahmad Fathy al-Fatani, 2013; Abdul Latif, 1989).

By the end of the 18th century and throughout the 19th century, Patani continued to serve as a center of Islamic civilization, despite its unstable political situation. It also became a hub for Malay Islamic literature, giving rise to prominent scholars such as Syeikh Daud Abdullah, Syeikh Wan Mohd Zain Mustafa, Syeikh Abdul Qadir Mustafa (Tok Bendang Daya), Syeikh Abdul Qadir Abdul Rahman (Syeikh Nik Dir), Syeikh Zainal Abidin Muhammad (Tuan Minal), Syeikh Muhammad Ismail (Syeikh Nik Mat Kechik), Syeikh Wan Ahmad Mohd Zain (Tuan Faridah), and Syeikh Abdul Rahman Mohd Ali (Tok Gudang). During this period, Patani, often referred to as the "Mirror of Mecca," attracted many Muslim students from Sri Lanka, Burma (now Myanmar), Cambodia, Vietnam, the Philippines, Peninsular Malay states, and regions such as Aceh, Sulawesi, Kalimantan, Java, and Brunei (Mohd. Zamberi, 1994).

The scholars of Patani are acknowledged for their significant contributions to the glory of knowledge and civilization in the Malay World. In the field of writing, they produced many high-quality works, which have been passed down through generations as valuable heritage. Some of these works have been printed and rebranded, while others remain in their original forms. This calls for further research and action so that these works can be shared and utilized (Hasanulddin Mohd, 2014).

The manuscript digitalization project of the Malay scholars' collections in southern Thailand, including Patani and the surrounding regions, aims to preserve the heritage of ancient manuscripts from extinction. Various manuscripts related to Islamic disciplines such as fiqh, theology, mysticism, tafsir, hadith, biography, and others have been documented and used by the Muslim community for the spread and continuity of this knowledge. The National Malay Manuscript Center at the National Library, National Archives of Malaysia, and the International Islamic Arts Museum are among the centers that have preserved and digitized the manuscripts of early scholars (Hasanulddin Mohd, 2018).

To ensure that the manuscripts of Patani scholars can be utilized by the Muslim community and in line with the development of the technological industry (IR 4.0), it is essential to document these manuscripts in digital form. UniSZA, as a university focused on Islamic studies that integrates modern knowledge evolution, is highly relevant to lead the manuscript digitalization project.

## **B. A Brief Overview of UniSZA's Manuscript Digitalization Project**

Since 2019, the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (KPT) has entrusted Sultan Zainal Abidin University (UniSZA) with the task of realizing the collection and digitalization of Islamic manuscripts. This effort is significant and relevant to UniSZA's mission as an Islamic-focused university that applies the latest technology to become the leading digital manuscript reference center in Malaysia and worldwide.

The Institute for Research in Malay Islamic Civilization (INSPIRE), as the secretariat for the UniSZA Manuscript Digitalization Project, has initiated several related activities. These include establishing research groups (sub-projects) based on manuscript tracking zones. Additionally, INSPIRE has formed partnerships through Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) and Memorandums of Agreement (MoAs) with various entities, including the National Library of Malaysia, National Archives of Malaysia, Terengganu State Museum, Durham University (United Kingdom), and others.

The main objectives of this project are:

- i. To make UniSZA a hub for Islamic and Malay World manuscript digitization in Southeast Asia.
- ii. To track, preserve, and retrieve Islamic and Malay World manuscripts of national historical value from around the world to Malaysia.
- iii. To digitize Islamic and Malay World manuscripts into the UniSZA e-Manuscript portal.
- iv. To disseminate knowledge contained in the manuscripts through the developed system.

This project is divided into 8 sub-projects, each led by UniSZA academic staff from the fields of manuscript expertise and information technology:

TABLE 1 LIST OF UNISZA MANUSCRIPT DIGITALIZATION SUB-PROJECTS

Sub-Project	Area of Focus
1	Digitalization of the Manuscripts of Malay Scholars from Terengganu
2	Digitalization of the Manuscripts of the Federated Malay States
3	Digitalization of the Manuscripts of Malay Scholars in Saudi Arabia
4	Digitalization of the Manuscripts of Malay Scholars in Aceh & Riau
5	Digitalization of the Manuscripts of Malay Scholars in Patani
6	Digitalization of the Manuscripts from the Terengganu Royal Palace and Brunei Sultanate
7	Digitalization of the Manuscripts of Malay Scholars in Kedah
8	Digitalization of the Manuscripts of Sorbonne University Paris, University of Leiden, and Portugal

As of August 21, 2024, the UniSZA Manuscript Digitalization Project has digitized 983 manuscripts, totaling 138,026 pages.

### C. Profiles of Southern Thai Malay Manuscript Locations

The identified locations possessing Malay manuscripts include several educational institutions such as Madrasah Ahmadiyah Islamiah, Maahad Khalil Islamiyyah, Madrasah Nurul Ihsan, as well as individuals like Abe Ase, Saudara Sanusi, and Makcik Wan Sepiah Binti Wan Daud. These are detailed as follows:

#### i. Quran Museum and Malay Manuscript Center, Madrasah Ahmadiyah Islamiah, Narathiwat

##### a. Background

Qur'an Museum and Malay Manuscript Centre is located at Madrasah Ahmadiyah Islamiah, Narathiwat. It is a national stream Islamic school and a traditional *turath* study *pondok*, which also houses valuable manuscripts of the Qur'an, religious books, and artifacts.

Madrasah Ahmadiyah Islamiah was founded by Tuan Guru Haji Ahmad bin Osman Samae (may Allah have mercy on him). He was born in 1896 and passed away in 1979 at the age of 63. Sheikh Haji Ahmad was a respected and knowledgeable scholar in Narathiwat Province. He was considered a key reference for issues of Islamic jurisprudence, especially in the field of *muamalat* (economic transactions) and trade. He was also an expert in *faraid* (Islamic inheritance law). Notably, he was the first person to introduce the Thai language curriculum into the traditional *pondok* system, aligning it with the mainstream education system and facilitating official affairs conducted in Thai.

The village surrounding the Madrasah Ahmadiyah was named Kampung Sela Anak Ayam, located in the Yinga District within the Lahan subdistrict. The name originated from a story: a king from Mukim Yinga once granted a one-acre plot of land to a loyal worker named Tok Ku. Tok Ku developed the area and founded a village called Kampung Tok Ku. He also built a shelter or rest hut (*sela*) as a resting point for travelers on their journey to Narathiwat. In those days, ox carts were used for travel and transporting goods. One traveler reportedly lost a chick (*anak ayam*) at the shelter, and the incident became widely known by word of mouth. Eventually, the place was renamed Sela Anak Ayam, and the village became known as Kampung Sela Anak Ayam, a name that endures today. Another version of the story attributes the name to the village's past as a large-scale poultry farm.

After the founder's death, Madrasah Ahmadiyah Islamiah was continued by his son, Ustaz Haji Muhammad Lutfi bin Haji Ahmad bin Osman Samae, who was born at the *pondok* and is currently in his 50s. He is the second of three siblings. His wife is Hamidah binti Rasak from Teluk Deraman, Pattani, and they have five children.

The madrasah won the Royal Award for Best School in Narathiwat Province for its administration. Ustaz Muhammad Lutfi was also honored as the Best Artifact Keeper by the Thai government in 2014. He was appointed to the National Security Council during Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's tenure in 2013. He leads the Islamic Art Museum and Malay Cultural Foundation or the Qur'an/Manuscript Studies Centre, and has held other roles including Head of Charity, Zakat Development, and National Harmony. He is also a committee

member of the Middle East Alumni Association, supervised by the Thai Army in southern Thailand (Syed Najihuddin, 2016).

## **ii. Maahad Khalil Islamiyyah (Pondok Qali), Bendang Bujur, Yala**

### **a. Background**

The history of Maahad Khalil al-Islami began with the arrival of Sheikh Muhammad Hasan in Bendang Bujur, Yala. Initially, he only conducted religious classes at specific locations without building a *pondok*. His efforts were continued by Sheikh Wan Ismail, who built a mosque and started classes in it. His son, Sheikh Wan Syamsuddin, initiated the building of a formal *pondok* by constructing a main hall. Students studied and stayed there. He passed away around the 1960s at nearly 100 years old.

Today, Maahad Khalil al-Islami is led and taught by Tuan Guru Wan Ismail Khalil bin Wan Husin Yalaedai. He began his studies in Bendang Bujur in 1983, then studied at Madrasah Asas al-Din (Pondok Melayu Bangkok) from 1984–1985. He studied theology (*Tauhid*) and *Usuluddin* with Ayah Dir Sekam, Arabic grammar (*nahw*) with Baba Abdullah al-Jarumi, and *Tasawwuf* with Pak Su Mat, Tuan Guru Haji Daud bin Haji Abdullah, and others. He completed high school (Kelas 9 & 10) at Madrasah Nahdhatul Ulum, Yala, and graduated from Sekolah Islam Haji Harun (now JISDA) in 1991–92. From 1992–2000, he studied in Egypt at Al-Azhar University, Faculty of Shariah.

Upon completing his degree, he returned to Thailand and pursued master's studies at Rajaphat University, Yala, and Thaksin University. He also continued informal studies under Baba Haji Wan Abdullah al-Khalil.

## **iii. Madrasah Nurul Ihsan, Pusin, Yala**

### **Brief Background**

This madrasah was founded by Baba Idris. It includes a mosque and religious classes for both adults and children.

## **iv. Abe Ase Antique Shop, Muang Pattani**

### **Brief Background**

The owner of an antique shop in Pattani City, he also maintains a personal collection of Sheikh Daud's manuscripts.

## **v. Brother Sanusi, Pondok Qali**

### **Brief Biography**

He is a descendant of Sheikh Mahmud Kemaman, a prominent Malay manuscript copyist. He is currently studying at Jamiah Islamiah Sheikh Daud Al-Fatani (JISDA) and part-time at Pondok Qali under Tuan Guru Ismail Khalil.

## **vi. Aunt Wan Sepiah binti Wan Daud, Pusin, Yala**

### **Brief Biography**

She is also a descendant of Sheikh Mahmud Kemaman. She resides in Kampung Pusin, Yala, Thailand with her children and grandchildren.

## **D. List of Southern Thai Malay Manuscripts**

Through the tracking and identification efforts in the aforementioned locations, researchers found a number of valuable Pattani Malay manuscripts. Some remain in good condition, while others are damaged or incomplete.

The manuscripts are categorized by location and field of Islamic knowledge, including Theology (Aqidah), Jurisprudence (Fiqh), Sufism (Tasawwuf), and others.

## i. List of Southern Thai Malay Manuscripts by Location

TABLE 2 LIST OF FATONI LITERARY MANUSCRIPTS ACCORDING TO TRACKING LOCATION

No.	Locations/Owners	Number of Manuscripts
1	Al-Quran Museum and Malay Manuscript Centre, Al-Ahmadiyah Al-Islamiah Madrasah, Narathiwat	25
2	Maahad Khalil Islamiyyah (Pondok Qali), Bendang Bujur, Yala	31
3	Madrasah Nurul Ihsan, Pusin, Yala	5
4	Abe Ase Antique Shop, Muang Pattani	4
5	Brother Sanusi, Pondok Qali	1
6	Aunt Wan Sepiah binti Wan Daud, Pusin, Yala	16
	TOTAL	82

## ii. List of Southern Thai Malay Manuscripts by Subject

### THEOLOGY (Aqidah)

- *Durr Al-Thamin Fi Bayan Aqa'id al-Mu'minin*
- *Bidayah al-Hidayah*
- *Al-Jawahir Al-Mandhamat fi Uqud al-Maqulat*
- *Sharh Umm Al-Barahin*

### JURISPRUDENCE (Fiqh)

- *Bughyah Al-Tullab*
- *Munyah Al-Musolli*
- *Idhah Al-Bab Li Murid Al-Nikah Bi Al-Shawab*
- *Al-Jawahir Al-Saniyyah Fi Sharh Al-Aqa'id Al-Aliyah Wa Al-Ahkam Al-Fiqhiyyah Al-Mardhiyyah*
- *Hidayah al-Mutaa'lim Wa 'Umdah al-Muallim*
- *Sullam al-Mubtadi fi Ma'rifah Tariqah al-Muhtadi*

### SUFISM (Tasawwuf)

- *Tanbih al-Ghafilin*
- *Risalah Tuhfah al-Mursalah fi Bayan Tariqah al-Ahmadiyah*
- *Risalah Hidayat Al-Muridin Li Tariq Al-Muqarrabin*
- *Hidayat al-Salikin*
- *Mir'ah al-Mu'minin wa Tazkirah li al-Ghafilin*

### QUR'AN

- *Mir'ah al-Quran fi Tashil Ma'rifah Ahkam al-Tajwid*
- *Siraj Al-Qari*

### LANGUAGE/GRAMMAR

- *Al-'Awamil Fi al-Nahw*

### ADAB (Etiquette)

- *Wirid and Du'a (Supplications)*



## SIRAH (Prophetic Biography)

- i- *Kifayat al-Muhtaj Fi Al-Isra' Wa Al-Mi'raj*
- ii- *(The Sufficiency of the Needy Regarding the Night Journey and Ascension)*

## OTHERS

- iii- *Taqrir (Notes) of Tuan Guru Haji Ismail bin Abdul Kadir (Pak Da Eil)*
- iv- *Will of Pak Da Eil to His Children and Grandchildren, Year 1384H*
- v- *Treatise of Al-Jadd on Medicine and Wisdom*
- vi- *Drawing by Haji Daud bin Haji Mahmud*
- vii- *Untitled Manuscript*
- viii- *Letter of Awan Daud bin Mahmud Al-Somad, Kampung Posin*
- ix- *Funeral Recitation (Talqin) owned by Haji Uthman*

## E. Challenges and Hopes

The UniSZA Manuscript Digitalization Project, particularly the sub-project focused on the Malay scholars' manuscripts from Patani, faced a multitude of challenges since its inception in 2019. These challenges were primarily exacerbated by external factors, including the global Covid-19 pandemic, regional security issues, and financial constraints.

One of the most significant challenges encountered was the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. The enforcement of movement control orders (MCO) disrupted various activities crucial for the project, particularly cross-border research activities. This limitation hindered researchers' ability to access manuscripts and collaborate with local scholars effectively. The pandemic has had a profound impact on research methodologies across disciplines, illustrating the need for adaptable strategies in the face of unforeseen global health crises (Baker, 2020).

The political instability in Southern Thailand further complicated the project's execution. The region has been beset by ongoing conflicts between government forces and local insurgents, which not only posed physical risks to researchers but also resulted in increased scrutiny and roadblocks by security forces. Such conditions limited researchers' mobility and access to vital resources, illustrating the complex interplay between research and geopolitical contexts (Sullivan, 2021).

Financial challenges also emerged as a significant barrier. The project operated within a limited budget, which necessitated strict accountability measures. Researchers often faced the expectation of providing tokens of appreciation to local collaborators, leading to personal financial burdens. This situation highlights a common dilemma in academic research, where funding limitations can impede progress and affect the quality of research outcomes (Smith & Jones, 2019).

Furthermore, researchers had to navigate the dual demands of academic responsibilities and the intensive nature of manuscript tracking. Balancing these commitments often led to time and energy constraints, ultimately affecting the project's timeline and productivity. The ability to manage time effectively is crucial in research, particularly in projects requiring extensive fieldwork and collaboration (Brown, 2022). Optimism for the Future

Despite these significant challenges, researchers involved in the UniSZA Manuscript Digitalization Project remain hopeful about achieving their objectives. The urgency of their mission is underscored by the risk of manuscript deterioration and potential loss. The preservation of these manuscripts is critical not only for academic scholarship but also for the cultural heritage of the Malay world. By digitizing and studying these resources, researchers aim to safeguard the legacy of Patani scholars and ensure their knowledge is accessible to future generations (Hassan, 2023). Through continued collaboration and innovative solutions, the project represents a vital effort to preserve the intellectual and cultural heritage of a historically rich but often marginalized community. The hope is that, through resilience and cooperation, the challenges faced will ultimately lead to a more robust understanding and appreciation of Malay scholarly traditions.

## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the UniSZA Manuscript Digitalization Project for Malay scholars' manuscripts in southern Thailand represents a crucial effort to preserve and disseminate Islamic knowledge in the region. Despite the challenges, the project's success will make a significant contribution to the academic and cultural heritage of the Malay world. The knowledge contained within these manuscripts will remain an essential resource for scholars, students, and anyone interested in the rich history and contributions of Malay scholars.

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