Malay Intellectual Heritage in the Manuscript Collection of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland: An Introduction

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ABSTRACT

The Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland (RAS) is one of the prominent research institutions in the United Kingdom that preserves manuscript collections from various parts of Asia, including the Malay World. Its Malay manuscript collection is associated with notable historical figures such as Sir Stamford Raffles, William Farquhar and Sir William Edward Maxwell. These manuscripts encompass a wide range of subjects, including history, literature, law, religion and community knowledge, reflecting the intellectual, cultural and historical development of Malay society. However, the role of RAS as an institution preserving historical documents relating to Asian countries, particularly its contribution to the preservation of Malay intellectual heritage, has received limited attention in previous scholarship. This article aims to trace the historical development of Malay manuscript collecting at RAS, examine the diversity and scope of its collection, and highlight its significance as a source of knowledge for multidisciplinary research. The study adopts a qualitative approach through library research and document analysis, drawing on bibliographic studies, academic publications and the official RAS catalogue. The findings reveal that the Malay manuscript collection at RAS represents a valuable repository of historical, literary, religious and socio-cultural knowledge, offering significant opportunities for research into the intellectual traditions and historical experiences of the Malay World. The study also demonstrates the importance of examining manuscript provenance, collection history and bibliographic documentation to enhance understanding of the formation and development of the collection. Furthermore, the findings highlight the need to preserve original manuscript documentation, improve metadata accuracy and strengthen institutional collaboration in manuscript research and digital preservation. In conclusion, the RAS Malay manuscript collection constitutes an important component of the international preservation of Malay intellectual heritage. It is hoped that this study will encourage further scholarly engagement with the collection and promote greater awareness of its historical and academic significance. Future initiatives should prioritise systematic cataloguing, digitisation and collaborative research between manuscript-holding institutions and researchers in the Malay World to ensure wider accessibility and sustainable preservation for future generations.

Keywords: Malay manuscripts; Royal Asiatic Society; Malay intellectual heritage.

INTRODUCTION

Malay manuscripts constitute an important heritage because they bring together the knowledge, ideas and experiences of Malay society as they have developed over time. Many of these manuscripts are written in Jawi script and cover diverse fields, including Islamic creed, fiqh, Sufism, law, history, medicine, language and literature. Their contents demonstrate the existence of a well-established Malay-Islamic scholarly tradition and

reflect the development of an intellectual heritage that has contributed to the formation of Malay identity and civilisation (Al-Attas, 1972; Braginsky, 2004). As repositories of knowledge, Jawi manuscripts possess not only historical and cultural value but also serve as primary sources for understanding Malay thought, scholarly methodologies and worldviews. Their contents include not only historical works and hikayat (narrative tales), but also legal texts, works of fiqh, medical treatises, astronomical knowledge and other forms of knowledge that developed within Malay society.

Malay manuscripts are now preserved in institutions both within and beyond the Malay World. The dispersal of these collections makes research into international catalogues important for identifying manuscripts, tracing textual variants and developing a more comprehensive understanding of Malay writing traditions. In the context of public collections in Britain, Ricklefs and Voorhoeve (1977) compiled information on Malay manuscripts held in various British public institutions, while Voorhoeve (1963) produced a specific inventory of Malay manuscripts in the Royal Asiatic Society (RAS) Library.

The Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland was founded on 15 March 1823 to promote research into the knowledge, literature and arts associated with Asia. Since its establishment, the Society has received materials donated by members and other contributors, including manuscripts acquired from various parts of Asia (Royal Asiatic Society, n.d.-a, n.d.-b). Its collections include Malay manuscripts associated with Raffles, Farquhar and Maxwell, making RAS an important institution for mapping Malay manuscripts internationally.

The development of digitisation has created new opportunities for research. RAS provides a Digital Library through which the public can access part of its collections online. On 25 April 2025, the Society announced the addition of 18 manuscripts to its digital collection, including 11 Malay manuscripts digitised in collaboration with Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA) (Royal Asiatic Society, 2025).

Previous scholarship has established a bibliographical foundation for the study of the RAS collections. Voorhoeve (1963) compiled a dedicated inventory of the Society's Malay manuscripts, updating information on titles, dates, contents and publication references, while Ricklefs and Voorhoeve (1977) situated these materials within a broader survey of British public collections. Both works provide a basis for identifying individual manuscripts, extending beyond an introduction to the institution itself. Yahya (2025) subsequently examined the acquisition sources of the Maxwell collection and local private libraries. Research on the RAS therefore already has an established foundation in bibliography and collecting history, and the research gap should not be framed as an absence of previous scholarship. However, these earlier studies did not focus specifically on the collection of Malay manuscripts digitised in collaboration with Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA).

This study is guided by three research questions: (1) Which Malay manuscripts in the RAS collection have been digitised in collaboration with UniSZA? (2) What range of contents and material forms is represented in the selected corpus, and what are the limitations of its classification? (3) How does this collection contribute to Malay intellectual heritage?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative approach through document analysis and comparison of catalogue metadata. For this revision of the article, the selected corpus comprises the 11 entries identified by shelfmark in Table 1: Maxwell 22, 43, 48, 50, 61, 93, 97, 115, 129, 131 and Raffles Malay 68. The figure of 11 refers to the entries listed for digitisation in collaboration with UniSZA; it neither represents the total number of Malay manuscripts held by the RAS nor indicates that all texts have been read in full. A single entry may contain several works.

The unit of analysis is the manuscript entry identified by its shelfmark, rather than its title alone. The fields compared include title, described contents, language or script where specified, date, physical extent, material, owner or donor, and catalogue references. Differences between records are documented as discrepancies requiring verification rather than resolved through assumptions. The metadata review for this revision was conducted on 9 November 2026; this date does not replace the author's original data collection dates.

Classification is based on the subject areas explicitly identified in the descriptions: history and literature, law and custom, religion and Islamic jurisprudence, and medicine and community knowledge. Categories may overlap, particularly in composite volumes. Titles are used only as provisional indicators where descriptions are insufficient. Entries with conflicting titles and descriptions are not assigned a definitive classification. Accordingly, the article neither calculates genre percentages nor makes statistical generalisations about the collection as a whole.

Three cases were purposively selected because their metadata provide sufficient detail to compare different forms of knowledge transmission: Raffles Malay 68 for variations in historical texts, Maxwell 50 for the transmission of religious knowledge, and Maxwell 131 for the transition from manuscript to typescript. Selection prioritises the strength of the documentation and differences in material form rather than statistical representativeness. Each case is discussed in terms of the item's identity, catalogue evidence, interpretation and the limits of the conclusions drawn.

The analysis added in this revision draws on catalogue descriptions and institutional sources. It does not present new transcriptions, textual quotations with folio references, or codicological findings derived from physical examination. The availability of digital images is not treated as equivalent to direct examination of the complete set of images. All information concerning materials, dates and contents in the case studies is attributed to RAS records.

Manuscript catalogues must be used critically because bibliographic information does not necessarily explain the full ownership or acquisition history of an individual manuscript. RAS itself notes that the collector names used in catalogue group headings, such as Maxwell, do not necessarily establish the provenance of every manuscript (Royal Asiatic Society, n.d.-c). Accordingly, collection names are treated as bibliographic indicators, while conclusions about a manuscript's provenance must be based on relevant metadata and historical evidence.

THE ROYAL ASIATIC SOCIETY AND ITS MALAY MANUSCRIPT COLLECTION

3.1 Institutional Background

The Royal Asiatic Society was established in London in 1823 through the efforts of Henry Thomas Colebrooke, a Sanskrit scholar who had served in India. The institution was founded to encourage the study of Asian history, languages, cultures and related fields of knowledge. It received a Royal Charter from King George IV in 1824 (Royal Asiatic Society, n.d.-a).

Since its establishment, the RAS has developed its collections through donations from members and the acquisition of materials from various regions of Asia. Official institutional information indicates that its collections include manuscripts in several languages, including Malay and Javanese (Royal Asiatic Society, n.d.-b). This article does not treat the institution's entire collection as the study corpus; the scope of the focused analysis is specified in Section 2.

From its earliest years, RAS developed its collections through donations from members and the acquisition of materials from different parts of Asia. According to the Society's official information, its holdings comprise approximately 2,000 manuscripts, although not all materials have been catalogued or digitised (Royal Asiatic Society, n.d.-b). These holdings include Malay manuscripts that are significant for research into the history, language, literature and religion of the Malay World. The catalogue Indonesian Manuscripts in Great Britain records 228 Malay and Javanese manuscripts in the RAS collection (Ricklefs & Voorhoeve, 1977).

The importance of RAS to Malay manuscript studies is reflected in the dedicated inventory compiled by Voorhoeve (1963). This inventory lists manuscripts from the Raffles and Farquhar collections and records materials in the Maxwell collection with reference to Blagden's inventory, published in 1899. Voorhoeve also included corrections and supplementary information on Malay manuscripts received from other donors. This demonstrates that documentation of the RAS collection has developed through the sustained efforts of librarians and scholars.

On a broader scale, Ricklefs and Voorhoeve (1977) compiled information on manuscripts in Indonesian languages held in British public collections. These publications provide a bibliographic foundation for locating manuscripts and connecting catalogue information with textual research. Nevertheless, inventories and catalogues should be consulted alongside current institutional records, since information, shelfmarks and digital access arrangements may change.

3.2 Collectors and the Acquisition History of Malay Manuscripts at the RAS

3.2.1 Sir Stamford Raffles

Sir Stamford Raffles was a prominent British imperial figure in Southeast Asia and an early scholar widely known for his work on the Indonesian region. In 1805, he travelled to Penang, where he began learning Malay. In 1811, he became Lieutenant-Governor of Java, a position he held until 1816. He subsequently returned to England, was knighted and published the first edition of his well-known work, History of Java, in 1817. He died near London in 1826.

Raffles was a diligent student of Malay and Javanese, although his command of both languages may not have equalled that of some of his contemporaries. He collected a large number of manuscripts, particularly in Malay and Javanese, most of which are now held by RAS. These manuscripts date from before 1816. RAS reports that Sophia, Lady Raffles, donated the Malay manuscript collection she had inherited from her husband to the Society in 1830. The Raffles collection includes texts relating to literature, history and Malay writing traditions (Royal Asiatic Society, n.d.-d).

Raffles's manuscripts were obtained from several sources, some of which are identified in the manuscripts themselves. A number of manuscripts from Palembang and Yogyakarta are believed to have been acquired following the British capture of these centres in 1812. However, many of the manuscripts were copied specifically for Raffles on English-made paper of the period. The Raffles manuscripts constitute one of the earliest and most important collections of Javanese and Malay manuscripts in Europe (Ricklefs & Voorhoeve, 1977).

One well-known manuscript is Sejarah Melayu, catalogued as RAS Raffles Malay 18. Also known as Sulalat al-Salatin, this work is an important source for examining historiographical traditions, Malay royal genealogies and political narratives associated with the Melaka Sultanate. Its presence in the RAS collection offers opportunities to study the textual history of the work and compare it with manuscripts preserved in other institutions.

3.2.2 William Farquhar

William Farquhar is directly associated with the history of Malay manuscript collecting at RAS. The Society's digital catalogue contains ten Malay manuscripts collected by Farquhar. These manuscripts were presented to RAS in 1827 (Royal Asiatic Society, n.d.-e).

In 1795, four years after beginning his service with the British East India Company, Farquhar was appointed chief engineer to the expeditionary force that captured Melaka from the Dutch. He spent much of his time there until 1818, when Melaka was returned to the Dutch, and served as Resident of Melaka from 1800 to 1818. In 1819, he became the first Resident of Singapore under its founder, T. S. Raffles. Farquhar was well regarded by various Asian communities in Melaka and Singapore, as reflected in Hikayat Abdullah, in which Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir Munshi provides considerable information about him (Hill, 1955). Farquhar was appointed Lieutenant-Colonel in 1821, with effect from 1819. He left Singapore in December 1823 and returned to Britain (Ricklefs & Voorhoeve, 1977).

Manuscripts in this group include Undang-undang Raja Melaka, Hikayat Raja Iskandar Dhulkarnain, Adat Segala Raja-raja Melayu and Sejarah Melayu. The digital catalogue provides titles, manuscript identifiers and, for some items, dates and brief descriptions (Royal Asiatic Society, n.d.-e). This diversity shows that the Malay manuscript collection is not confined to narrative works. The inclusion of legal and customary texts also opens avenues for studying legal traditions, systems of governance and social norms in Malay society. In this regard,

the catalogues by Voorhoeve (1963) and Ricklefs and Voorhoeve (1977) can be used to trace bibliographic records and identify references to specific manuscripts.

3.2.3 Sir William Edward Maxwell

Sir William Edward Maxwell (1846–1897) was an important figure in Malay manuscript collecting during the nineteenth century. He held several British administrative positions in the Malay Peninsula. The collection associated with him includes manuscripts and printed books covering a range of subjects.

RAS states that the Maxwell collection bequeathed to the Society comprised more than 100 volumes, most of them manuscripts. Some items were copied for Maxwell on European paper (Royal Asiatic Society, 2025). This indicates that Malay manuscript collections do not consist solely of older manuscripts that changed hands; they also include items produced or copied in the context of nineteenth-century knowledge collecting.

Yahya's (2025) study adds another dimension to our understanding of the Maxwell collection. By examining its relationship with local private libraries in the Malay Peninsula, the study demonstrates the importance of local sources for understanding the acquisition and circulation of books and manuscripts. This approach allows the history of the collection to be examined not only through the British figures who assembled it, but also through the owners, intermediaries and local library traditions that may have been involved.

Titles recorded in the RAS digital catalogue include Undang-undang Melaka, Kitab Ta'bir mimpi, Kitab ubat-ubat Melayu, Sejarah Trengganu serta Kelantan and Idah al-albab li-murid an-nikah bi al-ṣawab (Royal Asiatic Society, n.d.-c). These titles demonstrate the breadth of subjects represented in the Maxwell collection, ranging from law and history to traditional medicine and Islamic studies. The collection therefore merits further study as a source for understanding Malay intellectual history and manuscript circulation networks in the nineteenth century.

DIVERSITY OF CONTENT AND THE INTELLECTUAL VALUE OF THE COLLECTION

The following discussion of genres provides a contextual overview based on the catalogues; titles not listed in Table 1 serve as supporting examples and are excluded from the selected corpus of 11 entries. The corpus is examined in greater depth through three case studies in Sections 4.5–4.7.

4.1 Historical and Literary Manuscripts

Works such as Sejarah Melayu and Hikayat Hang Tuah are important to the study of Malay history and literature. Sejarah Melayu provides material for examining the origins and rule of Malay kings, while Hikayat Hang Tuah can be studied in terms of characterisation, loyalty, heroism and representations of the relationship between individuals and governing institutions.

The presence of these titles in the RAS catalogue indicates the potential for comparative manuscript research. However, identical titles do not necessarily mean that the manuscripts contain the same text. Establishing relationships between manuscripts requires examination of their texts, content arrangement, textual variants and copying histories. Bibliographic inventories such as Voorhoeve (1963) provide a starting point for identifying manuscripts, while philological analysis is needed to compare their contents.

4.2 Legal and Customary Manuscripts

The presence of titles such as Undang-undang Raja Melaka, Undang-undang Melaka and Adat Segala Raja-raja Melayu indicates that the RAS collection also contains sources relevant to the study of Malay law and custom (Royal Asiatic Society, n.d.-c).

Legal manuscripts can help researchers understand legal terminology, the organisation of rules, relationships between rulers and subjects, and norms governing social life. However, legal texts must be examined in relation

to their contexts of production and copying histories. The contents of an individual manuscript do not necessarily reflect uniform legal practice across all Malay regions.

4.3 Religious and Fiqh Manuscripts

The Maxwell collection also includes religious works, among them Kitab al-Faraid and Idah al-Albab li-murid an-nikah bi al-ṣawab (Royal Asiatic Society, n.d.-c). These works are relevant to the study of the development of Islamic knowledge in the Malay written tradition. Kitab al-Faraid concerns the law of inheritance, while Idah al-albab li-murid an-nikah bi's-sawab is associated with the work of Shaykh Daud al-Fatani on Islamic jurisprudence relating to marriage.

From the perspective of intellectual history, Malay fiqh manuscripts can contribute to research on the communication of legal rulings, the use of Arabic and Malay terminology, and the adaptation of legal knowledge to the contexts of local readers. Such research may also connect collections held overseas with the study of religious manuscripts preserved in local institutions.

4.4 Medical Manuscripts and Community Knowledge

The RAS catalogue also records Kitab ubat-ubat Melayu and Kitab Ta'bir mimpi in the Maxwell collection (Royal Asiatic Society, n.d.-c). These titles demonstrate the range of subjects collected, including knowledge relating to treatment and dream interpretation.

Such manuscripts may serve as sources for studying the history of local knowledge, medical terminology and the relationship between community knowledge and written traditions. Nevertheless, the actual contents and nature of the knowledge discussed must be established through close and detailed textual analysis.

Overall, the range of genres in the RAS collection demonstrates the value of Malay manuscripts as sources for multidisciplinary research. Inventories and catalogues facilitate the identification of materials, while textual analysis enables a more detailed assessment of the intellectual value of each manuscript (Ricklefs & Voorhoeve, 1977; Voorhoeve, 1963).

4.5 Raffles Malay 68 and Variations in Historical Texts

RAS records identify Raffles Malay 68 as a copy of *Sejarah Melayu* dated AH 1223/1808 CE, measuring 22.5 × 17.5 cm and comprising 143 pages. The record specifies European paper bearing the mark "JC 1805" and its receipt from Lady Raffles in 1830 (Royal Asiatic Society, n.d.-h). The year 1808 is the manuscript date recorded in the catalogue, whereas 1830 marks its accession to the collection. Neither should be treated as the date of the work's original composition.

The analytical value of this case lies in the description indicating that its ending corresponds to those of Raffles Malay 35 and 39, while its introduction differs. This relationship demonstrates that a shared title and partial structural similarities are insufficient grounds for treating several copies as a uniform text. From the perspective of intellectual heritage, a manuscript preserves choices concerning the organisation and presentation of history alongside its narrative content. However, the difference in the introduction is reported from the catalogue; without direct textual collation, this article does not identify the specific passages that differ, establish genealogical relationships between manuscripts or explain the reasons for these changes. This case therefore positions metadata as an entry point into specific philological questions rather than a substitute for philological analysis.

4.6 Maxwell Malay 50 and the Transmission of Islamic Jurisprudential Knowledge

Maxwell Malay 50 contains *Idah al-albab li-murid an-nikah bi's-sawab*. The catalogue records 77 folios, dimensions of 22.5 × 16.5 cm, European paper bearing the mark "AG" and its acquisition through the Maxwell bequest in 1898. Its description attributes the translation from Arabic, undertaken in Mecca in AH 1224/1809

CE, to Daud bin Abdullah of Patani; the item itself is assigned the uncertain date "[18-?]" (Royal Asiatic Society, n.d.-i). The translation date does not, in itself, establish when the manuscript held at the RAS was copied.

In the context of marriage jurisprudence, this information reveals several historical layers: the composition or translation of the work, its copying onto particular materials and its transfer to a holding institution. The documented Patani–Mecca connection situates Malay scholarship within transregional intellectual networks. However, this information does not establish the manuscript's physical route of transmission, the identities of all its owners or its use in teaching. The analysis maintains a distinction between the history of the work and the history of the object, while explaining why religious materials in the RAS collection have significance beyond a listing of titles.

4.7 Maxwell Malay 131 and Mediation in Medical Documentation

Maxwell Malay 131, *Kitab ubat-ubat Melayu*, is recorded as a 184-page romanised typescript produced in July 1954, measuring 33.5 × 20 cm. Its source was a manuscript owned by Engku Pengiran Anum of Kuala Terengganu, which was itself an abridgement of an older manuscript made by his father. The record identifies A. H. Hill as the donor and explicitly states that the item was not part of the Maxwell bequest (Royal Asiatic Society, n.d.-j).

This case distinguishes at least three layers of documentation: an older manuscript, a manuscript abridgement and a romanised typescript. The form available at the RAS thus transmits knowledge through processes of selection and changes in medium. Analytically, researchers need to consider possible abridgement and spelling changes when using this material to study medical terminology or the history of knowledge. Such possibilities cannot be established as specific textual changes without comparison with the manuscript sources. The year 1954 also marks the production of the typescript rather than the original age of all the knowledge it contains. This case demonstrates why the name "Maxwell" in the cataloguing system is insufficient evidence of provenance and why romanised materials must be distinguished from Jawi manuscripts.

4.8 Comparative Synthesis of the Case Studies

The three cases address the research questions through different forms of evidence: Raffles Malay 68 reveals variations in textual structure; Maxwell 50 distinguishes the history of translation from that of the manuscript copy; and Maxwell 131 demonstrates mediation through abridgement and typescript production, alongside the distinction between catalogue labels and provenance. Their shared finding is that intellectual heritage in the RAS collection has been shaped through processes of copying, compilation and documentation. This conclusion represents an interpretation of metadata rather than the identification of variant readings or comprehensive evidence of the social uses of the texts.

DIGITISATION OF MALAY MANUSCRIPTS BY RAS

Digitisation is an important development in widening access to manuscripts preserved in research institutions. Digital images and online catalogues enable researchers to identify and examine some manuscripts without having to visit their physical place of preservation. RAS provides a Digital Library offering free online access to part of its collection (Royal Asiatic Society, n.d.-b, n.d.-f).

For Malay manuscripts, the digital catalogue provides information such as titles, identifiers, language, dates and manuscript descriptions, where these details have been recorded. For example, the catalogue record for Sejarah Melayu in the Raffles collection enables researchers to identify a particular manuscript and connect it with earlier bibliographic information (Royal Asiatic Society, n.d.-g).

An important development took place on 25 April 2025, when RAS announced the addition of 18 manuscripts to its Digital Library, comprising 11 Malay manuscripts and seven Javanese manuscripts. RAS stated that the digitisation of the Malay manuscripts was carried out in collaboration with Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA), Malaysia. Most of the Malay manuscripts involved came from the Maxwell collection, alongside one manuscript from the collection donated by Sir Stamford Raffles's widow in 1830 (Royal Asiatic Society, 2025).

Table 1. Eleven Malay manuscripts digitised by RAS in collaboration with UniSZA

RAS manuscript reference	Title / description	Pages
Maxwell 22	Surah al-Anbiya'	302
Maxwell 43	Sharh Makah Madinah & Isra Miraj by Daud al-Fatani	212
Maxwell 48	Pantun Alif Bata	8
Maxwell 50	Idah al-Albab li murid al-Nikah	154
Maxwell 61	Kitab al-Faraid	44
Raffles Malay 68	Sejarah Melayu	146
Maxwell 93	A. Bidayat al-Mubtadi; B. Hujjat as-Siddiq	154
Maxwell 97	Hikayat Nabi Mi'raj	68
Maxwell 115	Zikir	65
Maxwell 129	Ilmu Penyakit, based on an oral lecture by Tg Su, uncle of the Sultan of Terengganu	73
Maxwell 131	Kitab Ubat-ubat Melayu, owned by Tengku Pengiran Anum of Terengganu	184

Source: https://emanuscript.unisza.edu.my/

This collaboration is significant because it demonstrates the involvement of a Malaysian research institution in widening access to Malay manuscripts preserved overseas. It also creates opportunities for researchers to conduct comparative studies, prepare transliterations and develop research based on digitally accessible manuscript images. Digitisation should be supported by consistent and accurate metadata. Information about a manuscript's identity, date, language, script, dimensions, contents, ownership history and acquisition source is essential for the appropriate interpretation of digital images.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RAS COLLECTION FOR MALAY MANUSCRIPT RESEARCH

The Malay manuscript collection at RAS has several major research benefits. It contributes to a more comprehensive international mapping of Malay manuscripts. Voorhoeve's inventory (1963) and the catalogue by Ricklefs and Voorhoeve (1977) provide a bibliographic basis for identifying manuscripts held in Britain. This information can be used to plan comparative studies and trace manuscripts that may be related to collections in Malaysia and other parts of the Malay World.

The RAS collection also provides primary sources for studying textual history. Manuscripts bearing the same title may differ in arrangement, readings, supplementary content and copying history. Comparative studies should therefore be based on textual evidence and manuscript descriptions rather than title similarities alone. Catalogues serve as tools for identification, while philological analysis helps establish relationships between manuscripts.

Furthermore, the collection creates opportunities to investigate the history of knowledge and manuscript circulation. Yahya's (2025) study of the Maxwell collection shows that the history of collecting should also take account of local private libraries and acquisition sources in the Malay Peninsula. This perspective connects the history of collections in Britain with the history of ownership, reading and book collecting in Malay society.

Digitisation strengthens these three areas of research by facilitating access and comparison between manuscripts. The RAS–UniSZA collaboration announced in 2025 illustrates how institutional partnerships can widen access to manuscripts and support transnational research (Royal Asiatic Society, 2025).

CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS FOR FUTURE COLLABORATION

Although digital access offers substantial benefits, several challenges require attention. These include inconsistent metadata, different numbering systems, variations in title spelling and limited information about acquisition histories. Such issues may make it difficult for researchers to link separate catalogue records. Earlier

bibliographic inventories should therefore be used alongside checks of current institutional catalogues (Ricklefs & Voorhoeve, 1977; Voorhoeve, 1963).

A second challenge concerns the distinction between access to digital images and access to complete information about a manuscript. Images may permit the text to be read, but they do not necessarily provide all the information required for codicological analysis or the study of ownership history. In some cases, physical examination or requests for additional information from the holding institution remain necessary.

A third challenge is the need to strengthen collaboration between holding institutions and researchers in the Malay World. Potential measures include standardising core metadata, developing shared inventories, providing fuller manuscript descriptions and collaborating on transliteration and textual editing. Such collaboration could improve the usability of digital catalogues and help researchers connect manuscripts held in different locations.

Research must also take account of the conditions governing the use of images established by holding institutions. Permission to access a digital image does not necessarily mean that it may be reproduced without restrictions. Checking reproduction policies, acknowledging sources and verifying catalogue information are therefore essential components of responsible research.

CONCLUSION

The Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland is an important institution for mapping Malay manuscripts preserved outside the Malay World. The collections associated with Raffles, Farquhar and Maxwell demonstrate the diversity of Malay writing traditions, encompassing history, literature, law, religion and community knowledge. Voorhoeve's inventory (1963), the catalogue by Ricklefs and Voorhoeve (1977), and Yahya's study (2025) provide an important foundation for understanding these collections from bibliographic and collecting-history perspectives.

Developments in digitisation have expanded research opportunities by providing access to manuscript images and catalogue information. The collaboration between RAS and UniSZA, which contributed to the digitisation of 11 Malay manuscripts announced in April 2025, is an important example of institutional cooperation to widen access to manuscript heritage (Royal Asiatic Society, 2025).

In conclusion, Malay manuscripts held by RAS should be regarded not merely as materials preserved overseas, but as important sources for understanding intellectual history and the circulation of knowledge in the Malay World. Future research should integrate textual analysis, investigation of acquisition histories, cataloguing and digitisation. Collaboration between holding institutions and researchers in the Malay World has the potential to strengthen documentation, improve access and broaden the contribution of Malay manuscripts to historical and scholarly research.

This study connects collecting history with a critical analysis of metadata within a selected corpus and three case studies. Its principal finding is that differences in dates, material forms and provenance shape how a manuscript is used as evidence of intellectual history. Its contribution lies in explaining these relationships, while recognising that catalogue descriptions cannot replace textual collation and physical examination. Further research should focus specifically on the contents of individual manuscripts to make the knowledge they contain more widely accessible to the public. Manuscripts sharing titles with those held in other libraries should also be studied comparatively to establish a text that most closely reflects the original author's intended meaning. Through these efforts, Malay manuscripts can continue to be preserved as part of the nation's intellectual heritage.

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