

THE IMAGE OF TURKEY IN THE MALAY WORLD

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It is always interesting to see how a country is considered or perceived from abroad. Most often such image differs quite substantially from what its inhabitants believe in the first place about their own country. Yet knowing what others think of a country as well as its population may help us to understand the importance of such country.

In this presentation we are going to see how Turkey was considered in the past in the Malay World¹ as well as how Turkey is seen at present in the same region of Southeast Asia. As a matter of fact numerous studies have been completed on the relations between the West and the Malay World but not too many as far as Turkey is concerned. Probably it would be worth while to have a look at the Ottoman archives in Turkey to find out first if the relations between Turkey and the Malay World have been recorded and then if such relations were deemed important or on the other hand rather secondary.

Our paper will be divided into four sections: first we are going to see how Turkey was known in the 15th and 16th centuries as Turkey and the Malay World have had long and fruitful relations over centuries. At the beginning Turkey was considered as rather mysterious, then at a second stage Turkey was much admired in the Malay World because of its important civilisation, then rather negative feelings suddenly appeared in the Malay World towards Turkey and finally Turkey and the Malay World have reached better and more mature relations in our time. Naturally the four sections sometimes overlap and are not therefore only consecutive.

First we may wonder how Turkey came to be known in the Malay World in the past. We are all aware that exoticism often replaces better knowledge, as information was not always easy to access. So the Malay World had a rather strange idea of what was Turkey in that period. It is a known fact that many literatures have made use of such feature, that is is exoticism to describe far away places and to try to interest readers. So in the case of Turkey the first reference of such entity in the Malay World has been the name "Rum". As a matter of fact Constantinople was known as such in the Malay World and it seems rather logical as Constantinople was known at one stage as the Second

¹ By Malay World it is usually meant four countries in Southeast Asia, namely Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore and the Sultanate of Brunei Darussalam.

Rome. So in the Malay World an important city state in the West had been Rome followed by a second which was thus known as Rum in classical Malay texts. This confused place name reminds us of how Westerners were first called in the Malay World. The first name which is mentioned in Malay classical literature is *Peranggi* (or *Feranggi*). At first such name referred to Portuguese as these Europeans were the first² to come and settle in Asia: they were the first to go beyond the Cape of Good Hope (1498), to reach India, then to proceed to Malacca, (their first visit was in 1509) and further to Japan, to the town of Kanegashima in 1543). The name *Peranggi* came to be the usual way to call Westerners in the Malay World from that time. It is still apparent on the island of Penang situated of the North West coast of Malaysia as a place name: *Batu Feringgi* (Foreigners' Rock). The second interesting name under which Turkey was known has been "Stamboel". The name of the Ottoman capital has always been revered in the Malay and Indonesian societies. One example of such admiration for the name and what it meant can be seen in a form of theatre, called "Komedi Stamboel" or "Bangsawan" the performances of which were quite common in the 19th century in the Malay World. This particular theatrical genre has been studied by several scholars in Malaysia and elsewhere.³ Yet the most comprehensive study has been published recently in the US. In that study it is stated that this new theatrical genre has been promoted by a Eurasian named August Mahieu.⁴ However we also find studies about "Komedi Stamboel" in Indonesia.⁵ So names from Turkey played a certain part in the region. But Turkey was not widely known at that time in the Malay World.

Our second section deals with more precise facts. At one stage the Malay World held Turkey in high esteem as Turkey and the Malay World shared some common features. For instance both were Muslim but not of Arab stock. As they see themselves as similar they tend to feel close to one another. One interesting feature which can be observed both in Turkey and in the Malay World roughly at the same time concerns language. Of course Turkish and

² If the Portuguese were the first to come and to settle in Asia, they have been also the last to leave such continent. The British relinquished Hong Kong in 1997, but the Portuguese only surrendered Macau two years later.

³ Among others we can mention *Drama Modern Melayu (Modern Malay Drama)* by Abdul Rahman Napsiah and published by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka in Kuala Lumpur in 1987, pp. 48-49; *Sejarah Perkembangan Drama Bangsawan di Tanah Melayu dan Singapura (History of the development of the Bangsawan theatre in Malaya and Singapore)*, by Rahmah Bujang and published by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka in Kuala Lumpur in 1975, pp. 22-23.

⁴ This study entitled *Komedi Stamboel. Popular Theatre in Colonial Indonesia 1891-1903* has been done by Mathew Isaac Cohen and published in Athens, Ohio, by Ohio University Press in 2006.

⁵ For instance according to Subagio Sastrowardoyo, the promoter of such theatre was indeed August Mahieu and such theatrical form played an important part in the Javanisation of the Indonesian culture in Central Java. This point of view was expressed in a seminar entitled "The position of the Palace in historical development which was held in Yogyakarta, Java, Indonesia on February 5th, 1992.

Malay-Indonesian are far apart as languages. Yet they do have some common points. For instance both used the Arabic alphabet for a long time before both languages decided to change and adopt a new alphabet based on the Latin script. Atatürk is not only known for his political career but also as a keen linguist. He did a lot for the development of Turkish in the late 1920s. Therefore both Malay and Turkish changed from the Arabic alphabet to the Latin one.⁶ One reason why Malay opted for such a change is that in Malay vowels are numerous and it was always a guessing process to find out which vowel was supposed to be represented, as in Arabic the vowels “e” and “i” are represented by the same letter. The same applies between “o” and “u”. So in order to avoid such potential confusion, Malay chose the Roman alphabet.⁷ Approximately at the same time an important development occurred in Indonesia which has had consequences on the development of the Malay-Indonesian language. At a huge rally in Batavia (now Jakarta) of a youth movement on October 28th, 1928, the youth decided that there should be “Satu Negara, Satu Bangsa, Satu Bahasa” (One state, one nation and one language). The language they chose at that time was very interesting as it was Malay. But as Java and Malaya (that is how modern Malaysia was known then) were somewhat different. The youth decided to name their language (that was Malay) Indonesian as it seemed more appropriate to call that name by that new name for nationalist purposes.⁸ Later on when Indonesia became independent under President Soekarno, it was decided that the official and national language of the country would be Indonesian. It is worth noticing that a suggestion by youngsters at a rally could lead to important consequences, namely the choice of a national language when the country became independent.

In another country young citizens also played a part as far as language is concerned. Such country is China. When the Versailles Treaty of 1919 was known in China, several hundreds of young Chinese took to the streets of Beijing to protest against the provisions of such treaty.⁹ But beyond political

⁶ If Turkish and Malay changed alphabets they were not alone, as for instance Vietnamese also changed from Chinese characters to the Roman alphabet which was suggested by Alexandre de Rhodes in the 18th century. Such suggestion by a foreigner was well received as it gave Vietnam a new identity and a way to show that the country was not a Chinese province but a different country altogether.

⁷ Yet we have to acknowledge that the Arabic script has been very useful to Malay. For many centuries that language did not have any proper script so literature was only oral but, with the coming of Islam in the region from the 12th century onwards, a new writing script was offered to the Malays and thus the important classical oral literature could at last be recorded on paper. So, all Malay Classical texts have been written in Malay, which used the Arabic script until the end of the 19th century. Without it, it is most likely that such rich literature would have been lost for ever.

⁸ So Indonesian is to Malay what American English is to British English or Portuguese spoken in Brazil to Portuguese spoken in Portugal and so on.

⁹ They were appalled that the former German Territories in China were just simply given to Japan as they should have been returned to China and not given again to a foreign power.

and historical background, the demands by the Beijing students extended to language. They asked for a modern Chinese to be used instead of the Classical and traditional usage. Later when the Republic was proclaimed in 1949, the modern Chinese they demanded was accepted and became the national language of China.

So in three separate countries, roughly at the same time – in the 1920s, youngsters made language suggestions which were later implemented by the political leaders of those respective countries. Language developments in Turkey under Atatürk were indeed noticed abroad and at times imitated. For instance Malay also shelved some Arabic influence when the language replaced some Arabic terms by terms taken from European languages. One example is the change of “Maktab” by “Kolej” in Malay.

One clear example of the feeling of strong admiration of Turkey in the Malay World can be seen in the conversation between several characters in the Malay novel, **Salina**.¹⁰ In that novel one of the characters, who are discussing the events at the beginning of World War II in Europe, declares that if Turkey joins in the fight it would indeed be a world war. Such was the impression Turkey gave at that time in the Malay World, which is a world power.

In fact in history, Turkey has often been considered as a strong power especially in the military field. So when a country needed help, Turkey was often considered. This happened in the Malay World as often Malay kingdoms were threatened by Siam. There are numerous records of Malay envoys and kings visiting the court of the Chinese emperors to seek recognition after their new installation¹¹, before and after Islam came to the Malay World, and to be recognised as legitimate monarchs¹². But later on the Ottoman court replaced somewhat the passage to the Chinese capital. At this juncture we may ask ourselves what form did take the Turkish help required by the Malay World. On answer to that question may be found in Malay Classical texts, such as **Hikayat Hang Tuah (Hang Tuah Annals)** in the 25th and 26th chapters. It is indeed mentioned that a Malay king sent an envoy to “Rum” in order to obtain weapons such as cannons and rifles so that the Malay kingdom could protect itself from Siamese attacks. Yet a problem occurs in a sense that in historical

¹⁰ This statement appears on page 281 of the novel, **Salina**, second edition, published by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur in 1965. By the way, **Salina** is considered as one of the most famous Malay novels in modern Malay literature and such novel has been translated into several language such as English in 1991 and French (**Salina**, traduit par Laurent Metzger, Paris, L’Harmattan, 1997).

¹¹ Usually in the Malay World, kings do not wear a crown, so there is no coronation but rather an installation for the new king to ascend the throne. As the Malay language is rich, three terms exist to indicate such event: “Pertabalan” in Malay, in Malaysia, “Penobatan” in Indonesian, and “Perpuspaan” in Malay spoken in Brunei.

¹² We have made a presentation of such topic at a seminar which was held at the University of La Rochelle, France, in April 2006 and which will appear in the proceedings of such seminar to be published later in 2008 by Peeters in Louvain, Belgium.

records available in Malaysia we are told that the character Hang Tuah¹³ lived at the time of the Malacca sultanate. Actually the Malacca sultanate extends from 1400 AD to 1511 AD, when the Portuguese conquered the city-state and put an end to the sultanate. However, as far as we know, there has been no contact between the Malacca sultanate and Turkey. On the other hand we do have numerous records of relations between Turkey and Malacca successor that is Aceh in Northern Sumatra. So the first record is the visit to Turkey, in 1562 by an envoy of Sultan Alaud-Din Riayat Shah al-Kahar who ruled Aceh in the 16th century.¹⁴ So in the case of **Hikayat Hang Tuah**, we have to consider that if the visit to Turkey is mentioned in such text, it means that Turkey was indeed famous and such fact was often reproduced in several texts. . In other words what is reported in **Hikayat Hang Tuah** regarding such visit is a mere repetition of what had already been stated in another classical text.¹⁵

Many historians in Malaysia have recorded the visits by envoys of the local kings to the Ottoman court in Istanbul. For instance Sabri Othman related to us that in the 16th and 17th centuries several Ottoman Sultans sent military assistance to Aceh first to help that sultanate to take over Malacca from the Portuguese and later to help Aceh defend itself from Siamese attacks.¹⁶

Apart from asking for weapons from the Turkish Sultans, we are also informed that Turkey sent a few missions to Aceh. For instance in 1612 when Sultan Iskandar Muda ruled Aceh, a delegation from Istanbul visited Aceh. Such visit is recorded in **Hikayat Aceh**. According to the Malay Classical text, the Ottoman Sultan fell sick and his doctors informed him that he needed to have his body rubbed with camphor and naphtha oil. The Sultan then asked where such oils could be found and the reply came that it was in the state of Aceh Darussalam. So, the Sultan sent an envoy to Aceh to find such products there.¹⁷ The Malay text continues to mention that the envoy arrived in Aceh,

¹³ Hang Tuah is a famous Malay warrior. He can be considered as one of the five musketeers of Malacca with his friends Hang Jebat, Hang Lekiu, Hang Kasturi and Hang Lekir. Hang Tuah and Hang Jebat, who were quite different characters are often portrayed as some of the most famous Malay heroes. Another type of heroes often found in oral literature is the traditional fool. We find such character both in Turkey and in the Malay World. In the form such character is Nasrettin Hoja and in the latter it is Pak Pandir.

¹⁴ See Denys Lombard, **Le sultanat d'Aceh au temps d'Iskandar Muda 1607-1636**, published in Paris, by Ecole Française d'extrême Orient in 1967, p 117.

¹⁵ Actually many repetitions occurred in Malay Classical texts and this may be due to the fact that prior to the coming of Islam to the region, literature was only oral. But when Islam was progressively accepted in the Malay World, kings asked their scribes to write down the numerous oral texts so that they could be read. At that stage confusions occurred and repetitions may have appeared.

¹⁶ **See:** "Malaysia and Turkey/Comparative Experiences and Bilateral Relations" by Sabri Othman in **Malaysia and the Islamic World**, by Abdul Razak Baginda (Ed), published by Asean Academic Press in London in 2004, p 142.

¹⁷ Sumatra is indeed a place where one can find camphor. Moreover one harbour, on the West coast of the island is precisely called Barus, which means camphor in Indonesian.

obtained the products and went back to Istanbul.¹⁸ But the text does not indicate whether the Ottoman Sultan recovered.

Therefore it is quite clear that Turkey has long been considered as a major power for the Malay World and that Turkey did play an important part in the Islamic World even in the 20th century. This is the point of view of Sabri Othman in the book above-mentioned.¹⁹ Another writer expresses the same point of view: For Ozay Mehmet, “The chief attraction of Turkey in the Malay World derived from the caliphate. The Ottoman Sultan was popularly perceived as the symbol of unity among the *Umma*”. Such quotation can be found in the book by Abdul Razak Baginda p. 144.

If Turkey has been considered as important by many Malay Sultanates in the past, we have also to bear in mind that the image of that country has been somewhat altered more recently. One reason for such a drastic change is due to the way the Malays have always regarded the caliphate. For some quarters in the Malay World, the fact that Atatürk abolished the caliphate in 1924 was a mistake. For them the Islamic World was most powerful during the caliphate. As a matter of fact Malays have often shown nostalgia for the past. For instance the history of the Malacca Sultanate is always portrayed as being a golden era for the Malays. In Malacca we can see the catch word “Malacca where all began”. Yet we all are aware that the Malacca Sultanate was strong at one stage as it followed the empire of Srivijaya and was followed by the Sultanate of Aceh. We also often notice another example of nostalgia among the Malays when they refer to the Prophet’s time. Then they mention de Madina’s Constitution and often believe that it was the best and should replace the modern ones.

So at present there is obviously a group of people in Malaysia and in Indonesia which laments over the demise of the Turkish Caliphate and would like to restore it. For them the caliphate should be recreated so that the Islamic world would be much stronger. Without a solid framework such as the Caliphate, Muslims may feel uncertain and ill at ease as for them the Caliphate could protect them. Such approach is not new in the Malay World and appeared for instance at the beginning of the 20th century with the *Sarekat Islam* (Islamic Association) which was set up in 1911. Later on a famous freedom fighter,

¹⁸ This visit is clearly mentioned in **Hikayat Aceh**, edited by Teuku iskandar, pp 161-169. and can also be seen in Denys Lombard’s translation of the story in **Le sultanat d’Aceh au temps d’İskandar Muda**, op. cit, pp 222-227. What would be interesting is if such event is also mentioned in Turkish Ottoman archives, in order to corroborate the information given to us in the Malay text.

¹⁹ One quotation is rather explicit about such point of view when it refers to the Ottoman Sultanate: “The history of this new state is the story of the most comprehensive and modernization in the Islamic World and elsewhere and served in one way or other as a source of inspiration for similar movements that were to follow. In some cases, rather than being merely a source of inspiration, it even triggered the modernization movements”, p 121.

Kartosuwirjo, the founder of the “Darul Islam” movement when Indonesia fought to obtain Independence, declared:” Atatürk has done little other than preside over the funeral of what had once been a formidable Islamic empire”. This statement appears in a recently published book by Ken Conboy.²⁰ Yet if some extremists did lament over the disappearance of the Ottoman Caliphate, other observers have been more objective. According to Farish Noor who runs a forum on Malaysia on the Internet tried to find out why Malays were so keen to restore the caliphate to go straight to the past, as if the past was so perfect. He continued in stating that when a society is facing a crisis, often it goes back to the past to find a way to solve it. According to Farsih Noor it is an easy way out but most of the time inappropriate as the situation must have changed. Therefore this observer cannot approve the intention of *Hizb’ut Tahrir* to hold a huge meeting in the capital of Indonesia on August 11th, 2007.²¹

As a matter of fact the intention of recreating the caliphate is not necessary at all as the Islamic World has come up with new organisations in order to unite Muslims. One of them is the Organisation of the Islamic Conference the headquarters of which is located in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.²²

Finally after facing several different periods the image of Turkey has come of age in the Malay World as Turkey is now considered as an equal partner of Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore and Brunei in many fields. So we notice that the relations between Turkey and the four countries remain very friendly and active. Leaders of both regions visit one another. When an important event takes place in Turkey or in the Malay World, representatives of both regions do attend. For instance in June 1997 a summit of the 8 Developing Countries (D-8) was held in Istanbul. Such event was well reported in the Malaysia press as it was considered important.²³

Another example of the good relations between Turkey and the Malay World can be seen with the visit of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Singapore, Zainul Abidin Rasheed visited Turkey in 2007 a few months after he had opened an exhibition on traditional arts of Turkey at the Malay Heritage Centre in Singapore.²⁴

²⁰ See **The Second Front. Inside Asia’s Mist Dangerous Network**, published by Equinox Publishing (Asia) Pte. Ltd., in Jakarta in 2006, p. 2.

²¹ **See:** his editorial on his Web page dated August 20th, 2007: www.othermalaysia.org. Such Web page is interesting as it gives alternative views to the usual media such as **New Straits Times, The Star** or **Utusan Malaysia**.

²² The first secretary general of the OIC has been Tunku Abdul Rahman, the first Prime Minister of Malaysia who stepped down as head of the Government of Malaysia in 1970 to become the first secretary general of the newly formed Islamic organisation.

²³ For instance in **Utusan Malaysia**, on June 12th and June 15th. On June 16th, the photo of the eight leaders attending the meeting appears on the front page of the newspaper.

²⁴ **See:** the press release by the Singapore government dated march 16th, 2007 on the **Web:** <http://app.sprinter.gov.sg>.

