

Correspondence Between the Johor Palace and Arab Merchants: A Historical Documentation Study in the 19th Century

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Abstract: Before the arrival of British colonial influence, Johor had developed close economic relations with Arab merchants who were active in sectors such as mining and agriculture. This article examines a series of royal correspondences (warkah) exchanged between the Johor royal court and Arab merchants, which serve as primary evidence of institutional trust and support in economic collaboration. Using the historical documentation method, the study explores both the textual content and the broader historical significance of these letters in the context of Johor's economic expansion during the 19th century. Primary sources from archival records are analysed alongside secondary literature comprising scholarly works and previous studies. The findings highlight Johor's open-door economic policy and the diplomatic role of the royal institution in fostering foreign investment, particularly from Arab entrepreneurs. By foregrounding royal correspondence as economic evidence, this study demonstrates how documentary heritage can revise prevailing colonial-era narratives that privilege a single entrepreneurial community, thus advancing Southeast Asian historiography on plural economic agency. It also underscores the policy relevance of archival preservation and digitisation, showing how improved access to warkah enables cross-disciplinary analysis of state-merchant relations and supports sustainable heritage governance.

Abstrak: Sebelum datangnya pengaruh kolonial Inggris, Johor telah mengembangkan hubungan ekonomi yang erat dengan para pedagang Arab yang aktif di sektor-sektor seperti pertambangan dan pertanian. Artikel ini menelaah serangkaian korespondensi kerajaan (warkah) yang dipertukarkan antara istana kerajaan Johor dan pedagang Arab, yang menjadi bukti utama adanya kepercayaan institusional dan dukungan dalam kerja sama ekonomi. Dengan menggunakan metode dokumentasi sejarah, penelitian ini mengeksplorasi baik isi teks maupun signifikansi historis yang lebih luas dari surat-surat tersebut dalam konteks ekspansi ekonomi Johor pada abad ke-19. Sumber primer dari catatan arsip dianalisis bersama dengan literatur sekunder yang mencakup karya ilmiah dan penelitian sebelumnya. Temuan menunjukkan kebijakan ekonomi pintu terbuka Johor serta peran diplomatik lembaga kerajaan dalam mendorong investasi asing, khususnya dari pengusaha Arab. Dengan menempatkan korespondensi kerajaan sebagai bukti ekonomi, penelitian ini menunjukkan bagaimana warisan dokumenter dapat merevisi narasi era kolonial yang cenderung memusatkan perhatian pada satu komunitas wirausahawan saja, sehingga memperkaya historiografi Asia Tenggara tentang agensi ekonomi yang bersifat plural. Selain itu, penelitian ini juga menekankan relevansi kebijakan dalam pelestarian dan digitalisasi arsip, dengan menunjukkan bagaimana peningkatan akses terhadap warkah memungkinkan analisis lintas disiplin tentang hubungan negara-pedagang serta mendukung tata kelola warisan yang berkelanjutan.



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INTRODUCTION

The early history of Johor reflects an era of openness and economic advancement long before the formal intervention of British colonial powers in 1914. One of the key elements of this development was the involvement of Arab merchants, who played a pivotal role in Johor's economic activities and established close ties with the royal court. These merchants not only brought in capital and expertise but also introduced strategic and influential international trade networks (Andaya & Andaya, 2001). From the formation of the Johor Malay Sultanate, the presence of Arab traders significantly strengthened the region's economic connectivity. Initially, their activities were centred on inter-port trade, particularly with Singapore, which functioned as a major trading hub. Johor's geographical proximity to Singapore incentivised Arab merchants to expand their investments into Johor's economic sectors (Ahmad, 2013). Over time, these investments extended into mining and agriculture, facilitated by the granting of land concessions from the Johor royal court prior to the consolidation of British influence in the state (Mohamed, 2010).

The royal court's trust in these Arab merchants is evidenced by issuing official correspondence (*warkah*) that granted them the legal rights to commercially exploit land. These letters not only functioned as administrative instruments but also carried significant historical value, reflecting the economic direction and policies of Johor at the time (Ibrahim, 2015). Despite their importance, such documents remain under-explored in mainstream historical scholarship, even though they are crucial primary sources for understanding the economic and diplomatic relationships between Johor and the broader Arab world (Osman, 1997).

In response to this gap, the present study focuses on royal letters issued to Arab merchants, as well as letters sent by Arab merchants to members of the Johor royal family. These correspondences were sourced from the National Archives of Malaysia, Southern Branch in Johor Bahru (National Archives of Malaysia, n.d.). This study analyses the contents, script, dates, and implicit meanings embedded in these letters. Furthermore, it assesses the direct impact of these documents on the involvement of Arab merchants in Johor's economic activities prior to formal British control. The scope of the study covers the mid-19th century up to 1914, marking the final phase of Johor's sovereignty before becoming a British protectorate. This research also offers insights into the function of royal correspondences as economic policy tools and as sym-

bols of trust between the Johor rulers and foreign trading communities, especially Arab merchants. Before expanding the discussion further, the study will first outline the key research problems related to the role of royal letters in the economic relationship between Johor and Arab merchants.

In line with traditions in the study of Hadrami networks and the Indian Ocean world, which emphasise the mobility of capital, scholarship, and kinship, the Johor letters analysed here reveal patterns comparable to the investments of Arab diaspora in other regional port-polities, particularly Singapore. This comparison highlights Johor as a cosmopolitan node where Malay royal sovereignty intersected with transregional Muslim merchant networks, consistent with new historiography on maritime cosmopolitanism and Southeast Asian port cities. In doing so, the study contributes a documentary dimension to international debates on diasporic economic agency and royal diplomacy in the nineteenth-century port economy (Azra, 2004; Freitag & Clarence-Smith, 1997).

Research Problem and Objectives

The Arab community represented one of the most influential foreign groups actively engaged in the socio-economic landscape of nineteenth-century Johor. Although relatively small in number, with the 1911 official census recording only 699 Arabs residing in the state (Department of Statistics, 1911; Morley, 1949), their societal contributions far exceeded their demographic representation. Studies by Alatas (2017) and Hassan (2021) have shown that Arab communities played an essential role in the propagation of Islam throughout the Malay Archipelago, particularly through religious education and state-sponsored religious institutions. In Johor, close relations between prominent Arab figures and the royal household enabled several of them to hold significant positions such as mufti, qadi, and religious instructors (Yatim, 2019).

Despite these notable religious and cultural roles, scholarly attention to the economic dimension of Arab involvement in Johor remains limited. In particular, the analysis of their interactions with the Johor royal court through official correspondence has yet to be comprehensively explored. Most previous research has focused on the religious or cultural dimensions of Arab contributions (Rahman & Zakaria, 2020), while studies that examine primary sources—such as royal letters (*warkah*)—from the nineteenth century remain scarce, especially during the critical period prior to British political domination (Shuib & Nasir, 2022).

This study centres on three primary correspondences: first, the *Tin Mining Concession Agreement Letter* between Maharaja Abu Bakar and Syed Abdullah Umar al-Junid and his family, dated 1863; second, the *Land Concession Letter of Kukup* issued to Syed Muhamed Ahmad Abdul Rahman al-Sagoff in 1878; and third, a lesser-known letter dated 6 February 1887 from Syed Husain Muhamed al-Habsyi of Palembang concerning property matters described as “*harta Qarun*.” These documents are significant as they provide insight into the nature of trust, authority, and economic collaboration between the Johor royalty and Arab merchants. Nevertheless, the extent to which these correspondences reflect the economic standing of Arabs in Johor remains inadequately studied (Ismail, 2022; Abdullah & Hamid, 2023). Furthermore, royal correspondences have yet to be fully utilised as historical sources for analysing political-economic relations between Johor’s elite and foreign trading communities.

Hence, this study aims to address these gaps by documenting and critically analysing the contents and contexts of these royal letters and assessing their historical implications on Johor’s economic development. Specifically, the study seeks to: (1) Analyse the contents, script, and historical contexts of royal letters exchanged between the Johor royal family and Arab merchants in the nineteenth century, with particular attention to the economic implications embedded in the documents.; (2) Evaluate the function of these correspondences as instruments of economic engagement between the Johor court and Arab entrepreneurs, particularly in the mining and agricultural sectors; (3) Assess the impact of these correspondences on the active economic involvement of Arab merchants in Johor before the onset of formal British colonial administration in 1914.

Through this inquiry, the study seeks to contribute to the broader understanding of Johor’s economic history by highlighting underexplored primary sources—namely, royal letters—as tools of historical documentation that reflect diplomatic, economic, and cross-cultural exchange strategies between local rulers and transregional trading elites.

Literature Review

The Arab community in the Malay Archipelago has long attracted scholarly attention across disciplines such as history, sociology, and Islamic studies. Much of the literature has centred on their role in the spread of Islam, religious institutions, trading

networks, and interactions with local elites, including royal courts. Alatas (2017) highlights how the intellectual and religious networks established by Arab descendants, particularly those from Hadramaut positioned them as influential agents of da’wah, shaping the religious identity of the local population. Complementing this, Hassan (2021) emphasises the contributions of Arab figures within state religious institutions in Johor, including their appointments as muftis and religious teachers, thereby influencing the religious policies of the state.

From a socio-economic perspective, the pioneering work of Freitag and Clarence-Smith (1997) outlines the importance of Hadrami-Arab commercial networks that spanned across Southeast Asia since the eighteenth century. In Johor, their involvement in mining, agriculture, and commercial enterprises is evidenced through land concessions and investment agreements. However, focused research that examines royal letters (*warkah*) as primary sources of economic history remains scarce. Shuib and Nasir (2022) argue that royal correspondences have significant potential as historical documents that reveal power dynamics and economic relations between local elites and foreign traders.

In terms of archival documentation, Abdullah and Hamid (2023) call for more studies grounded in archival sources, such as official letters, land agreements, and personal documents, to reconstruct the economic foundations of early Malay states. In the case of Johor, the involvement of Arab merchants with the royal family is visible in the form of land concessions, mining rights, and investments in commercial ventures (Ismail, 2022). The 1878 concession granted to Syed al-Sagoff, for instance, exemplifies direct investment and institutional trust extended to Arab merchants by the Johor royal court. Yatim (2019) further investigates the symbolic dimensions of these interactions, noting that the conferment of honorific titles upon Arab figures signified socio-political recognition by the Johor monarchy. Meanwhile, Rahman and Zakaria (2020) contend that despite their small demographic presence, Arab cultural influence in Johor can be discerned through language, thought, and educational institutions.

Early demographic records provided by Morley (1949) and the Department of Statistics (1911) offer preliminary data on the Arab population in British Malaya. However, these figures must be supplemented by contextual documentation such as royal letters in order to construct a more compre-

hensive historical narrative (Sri Hartatik & Shinta-siwi, 2021). In this regard, Zulkifli et al. (2021) underscore the need for an integrated historical documentation approach, one that encompasses content analysis, script analysis, and the historical contexts of such documents.

Studies by Omar (2015) and Azra (2004) also contribute to our understanding of transregional connections between the Hadrami-Arab diaspora and the Malay world, with Johor functioning as a strategic hub in these trade and political networks. The state's geographic proximity to Singapore and its openness to foreign participation rendered it a key node in these broader historical linkages.

In addition to the existing historiographical discourse, the growing relevance of digital historiography offers new pathways for expanding access to and interpretation of historical documents such as royal letters. As noted by Noor and Ahmad (2023), using digital tools in archival preservation and text analysis not only accelerates the safeguarding of historical heritage but also enables interdisciplinary interpretations of sociopolitical and economic relations embedded within such documents. This is particularly crucial for private and exclusive correspondences once inaccessible to the broader academic community. Karim and Latiff (2022) further advocate for integrating digital methodologies with traditional textual analysis, allowing researchers to detect linguistic patterns and rhetorical structures in historical documents, thereby uncovering deeper meanings and implicit narratives.

In the context of the present study, such methodologies could illuminate diplomatic, economic, and social strategies between the Johor royal court and Arab merchant communities. A more integrated historical documentation approach, supported by digital tools and critical analysis of primary sources, is therefore essential for reinterpreting Johor's economic history from a more holistic and contextual perspective.

In sum, while existing research has extensively addressed the religious, cultural, and commercial roles of Arab communities, the documentary dimension—particularly through royal correspondences, remains significantly underexplored. This study seeks to enrich the historiography of Johor's economic development by foregrounding these original documents as vital sources of historical evidence that have long been overlooked.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach grounded in historical document analysis, specifically uti-

lising content analysis as its core methodological framework. The purpose of this approach is to critically examine the content, form, and historical context of three royal correspondences (*warkah*) exchanged between members of the Johor royal household and Arab merchants in the nineteenth century. Such methodology is particularly appropriate when primary sources such as letters, manuscripts, and archival documents serve as the central corpus of historical investigation (Bowen, 2009; Krippendorff, 2018). Primary data were drawn from original letters preserved in national archives and private collections, many of which have been transliterated for scholarly access and analysis. The selected *warkah* were analysed based on four principal dimensions: (i) the content and key messages conveyed in the letters; (ii) the structure and rhetorical style of the writing; (iii) the actors involved and their relationship with the Johor court; and (iv) the broader socioeconomic and political contexts that framed the production of the documents. In addition, secondary sources—including colonial reports, economic histories of Johor, and prior scholarly works—were used to support and contextualise the primary data.

This methodological choice is informed by the works of Howell and Prevenier (2001) and Scott (1990), who emphasise the epistemological value of primary sources in reconstructing historical realities. To ensure the authenticity and reliability of the data, document triangulation was employed by comparing the contents of the *warkah* with corroborative materials such as land records, concession agreements, and census data. Beyond focusing on the textual content and its implications for understanding Johor's economic and political structures, this study also integrates a micro historical perspective. This approach facilitates a closer examination of individual lives and their roles within local power and economic networks, details often overlooked in macro historical narratives. According to Magnússon and Szijártó (2013), microhistory allows scholars to uncover hidden social dynamics by attending to specific texts, actors, and localised contexts. In this respect, the *warkah* are not merely formal documents, but also function as "cultural texts" that reveal power relations, communication ethics, and trade norms between Johor's royalty and Arab merchants.

This analytical stance aligns with Tamm's (2020) call for the use of private historical documents to explore transnational dimensions of economic and social history. Therefore, the use of microhistory, facilitated through content analysis of

royal correspondence, strengthens the epistemological status of primary sources while enriching the historical narrative of Johor by giving voice to individuals and communities traditionally marginalised in mainstream historiography.

The selection of the three *warkah* was guided by their historical significance, economic relevance, and the degree of Arab involvement in Johor's power structures. Each document reflects a specific form of Arab participation in the state's economy and provides valuable insight into elite interactions. The first is a tin mining concession agreement between Maharaja Abu Bakar and Syed Abdullah Umar al-Junid (1863), which illustrates a bond of trust between the Johor royalty and Arab merchants in the mining sector, one of the pillars of Johor's economic development at the time. The second is the Kukup Land Concession granted to Syed Muhamed Ahmad Abdul Rahman al-Sagoff (1878), a document that underscores Syed al-Sagoff's role as a foreign investor entrusted with the management of a strategic economic zone, highlighting the integration of Arab capital into Johor's royal economy. The third is a letter from Syed Husain Muhamed al-Habsyi of Palembang concerning the "Qarun property" (6 February 1887), offering a rare glimpse into familial and transregional economic ties involving Arab elites beyond Johor, and illustrating the broader networks of commerce and kinship across the Malay world. These letters remain largely understudied as original historical sources, making them particularly suitable for in-depth document-based research. Their selection also responds to calls by scholars such as Shuib and Nasir (2022) and Zulkifli et al. (2021), who advocate for increased engagement with primary documents in the study of early Southeast Asian economic history.

This study recognises several limitations inherent to royal correspondence as primary sources: (i) archival gaps and uneven survival of letters across years; (ii) potential authorial and institutional bias embedded in royal voice, honorifics and formulaic phrases; (iii) palaeographic and transliteration challenges associated with Jawi script and Hijri dating; and (iv) selection bias, since surviving *warkah* often concern elite actors. These limitations were mitigated through document triangulation (cross-checking land records, concession agreements, census extracts and related letters), contextual reading against contemporaneous economic histories, and transparent coding of content, structure and actors. Where meanings were ambiguous, especially in legal terms such as "in perpetuity," we adopted conservative interpretations and reported

competing readings where relevant. This strengthens the reliability of inferences while acknowledging the partial and situated nature of the documentary record.

THE ARAB PRESENCE IN NINETEENTH CENTURY JOHOR

Two complementary lenses are used to frame the analysis: patron–client relations and transregionalism. The former explicates how royal patronage, legal concessions and symbolic capital structured access to resources and obligations between rulers and merchants; the latter situates Arab–Johor exchanges within Indian Ocean circuits of people, capital and ideas. Reading the *warkah* through these lenses allows us to track how documentary forms (script, seals, fiscal clauses) materialised patronage ties while linking Johor's local political economy to wider diasporic networks centred on Singapore and beyond.

The Arab community in nineteenth-century Johor was not merely a transient mercantile or religious presence, but a formative force in shaping the state's political and social fabric. In particular, the Hadrami Arabs played a crucial role in constructing elite social networks grounded in trust, economic mobility, and Islamic values. Their involvement in religious institutions, education, and commercial enterprises positioned them as trusted allies of the Johor royal court. This is evidenced by the granting of land concessions to prominent Arab figures such as Syed Muhamed al-Sagoff and Habib Hassan Ahmad al-Attas (Esa, 1999b).

According to Freitag and O'Neill (2022), the Hadrami diaspora in Southeast Asia represented a dynamic transregional entity that disseminated reformist Islamic ideas while forging strategic alliances with local political elites. This adaptive strategy is clearly reflected in Johor, where royal letters (*warkah*) reveal not only the respect accorded to Arab merchants but also their integration as political and economic partners of the royal household. Such integration was not assimilative in nature, but rather symbiotic, characterised by mutual reinforcement and shared interests.

The archival documents analysed in this study, particularly official correspondence, demonstrate that Arabs in Johor were not simply economic migrants, but historical actors actively shaping the identity of a modernising state. *Jawi* script, Hijri dates, and royal insignia in these letters indicate a strong degree of cultural and religious affinity between the Johor court and the Arab community. This cultural congruence extended beyond superfi-

cial symbolism and reflected deeper institutional trust and cooperation. Recent scholarship by Ho (2023) argues that interactions between Arab diasporas and Malay royal institutions contributed to the emergence of a transnational maritime civilisation that transcended modern national boundaries. Within this civilizational framework, documents such as official letters and concession agreements served as instruments of legitimacy and repositories of collective historical memory.

Consequently, the analysis of royal correspondence offers valuable insights into the complex role of Arabs in Johor's socio-political development. Far from being peripheral actors, they were instrumental in articulating a vision of Johor as a polity that was both cosmopolitan in its openness to cross-cultural partnerships and firmly rooted in Islamic values and royal sovereignty. These findings highlight the importance of re-examining Southeast Asian history through the lens of documentary heritage, which captures voices and relationships often marginalised in conventional historiography.

ROYAL CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN THE JOHOR COURT AND ARAB MERCHANTS IN MINING ACTIVITIES

Since the 19th century, the Sultanate of Johor had granted mining lands and land concessions to selected individuals, including Arab merchants. These concessions constituted formal authorisations by the ruling authority, permitting the development of specific areas for mining or agricultural purposes. Such grants reflected not only diplomatic ties but also political trust between the Johor royal court and Arab entrepreneurs. Within this context, Arab merchants were perceived not merely as investors but also as pivotal actors in the broader economic expansion of the Johor state (Ahmad, 2016; Omar, 2015).

Evidence of Arab involvement in tin mining activities dates to the reign of Sultan Husain Syah (1819–1835). In 1825, Syed Akil was appointed to oversee tin mining operations on Pulau Karimun, with the areas of Ungar, Buru, and Sugi falling under his jurisdiction. The *Tuhfat al-Nafis*, a key Malay historical chronicle, records this development as follows:

Sayid Akil built a residence on Pulau Karimun and gathered Chinese and Malay workers to dig tin ore... (Ahmad & Haji, 1982).

This passage not only situates Arab involvement in the early economic history of Johor but also highlights the multiethnic composition of the labour force, an indication of transregional collabora-

tion. Syed Akil's engagement of both Chinese and Malay labourers for mining reflects a strategic mobilisation of human capital and resource networks (Winstedt & Wilkinson, 1938). Notably, Syed Akil was partnered with Cox, an Englishman who acted as a joint investor in this enterprise. This collaboration suggests that Arab merchants were not isolated actors but rather key nodes in broader networks of colonial and indigenous capital. More significantly, granting such economic responsibilities underscores the royal court's trust in Arab intermediaries to lead critical sectors of Johor's economy.

The strategic placement of Arab figures like Syed Akil at the helm of mining initiatives reflects the sultanate's pragmatic approach to state-building, where loyalty, religious affiliation, and economic competence intersect. It also reveals the Johor court's adaptive governance style, integrating diasporic commercial elites into its political economy in ways that promoted both internal development and external legitimacy.

Archival records suggest that formal letters of agreement between the Johor court and Arab merchants became traceable only during the era of Temenggung Abu Bakar. Renowned as the architect of Johor's economic modernisation, Abu Bakar successfully attracted foreign investors, particularly Chinese capitalists, to develop gambier and black pepper plantations beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. He also encouraged merchants based in Singapore to invest in Johor, as illustrated in the observation: "...the eyes of the merchants in Singapore were opened to Johor, and they began to introduce capital in various ways" (Yusof, 1958). Arab merchants, particularly those operating from Singapore, also benefited from the expanding economic opportunities in Johor.

The earliest documented letter of agreement (*warkah*) between the Johor court and Arab merchants is dated 12 Rabi' al-Awwal 1280 AH (1863 CE). This letter represents a formal concession granted by Temenggung Abu Bakar to several Arab merchants. Significantly, the letter was written in *Jawi* script and employed the Hijri calendar, underscoring the Islamic cultural influence underpinning such transactions. The agreement also bore the official seal of the Maharaja (see Figure 1). The recipients of the concession were Syed Abdullah Umar al-Junid, Syed Junid Umar al-Junid, Syed Abu Bakar Umar al-Junid, and Syed Salim Mohsain al-Attas, to whom Abu Bakar granted the rights to operate tin mines in Ayer Puteh (National Archives of Malaysia [NAM], 1863). Ayer Puteh, located near Skudai, approximately 30 kilometres from Iskandar Puteri

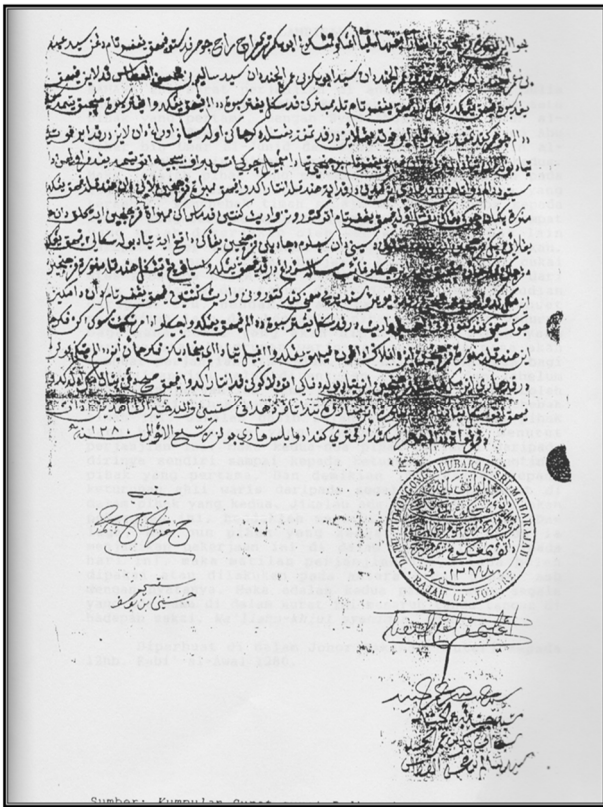


Figure 1. Letter of Agreement on Tin Mining Concession between Maharaja Abu Bakar and Syed Abdullah Umar al-Junid, Syed Junid Umar al-Junid, Syed Abu Bakar Umar al-Junid, and Syed Salim Mohsain al-Attas, dated 12 Rabi' al-Awal 1280 (1863). Source: Collection of Various Letters Preserved by the Johor State Secretary, 1843–1927, Johor Bahru: National Archives of Malaysia, Southern Branch.

(now Johor Bahru), served as the location of the agreement's formalisation.

The first party promises not to collect any tax on the tin ore produced from this site for two years from today. After this period, both parties shall draft a new agreement, and the second party must abide by whatever tax the first party or his heirs shall impose in the future. Should any second party be absent, those remaining must honour this agreement; if no action is taken within three months, the agreement shall be null and void (National Archives of Malaysia, 1863).

This agreement reveals several key historical insights. First, the three al-Junid signatories were prominent Arab merchants from Singapore, a family known for their dominance in maritime trade since the early nineteenth century (Freitag & Clarence-Smith, 1997). The al-Junid family was among the earliest Arab settlers in Singapore, with Syed Muhamed Harun al-Junid and his nephew Syed Umar Ali al-Junid arriving from Palembang in 1819. They played central roles in commercial activities across the Straits Settlements, including Penang (Buckley, 1984; Turnbull, 1977). Second, their involvement in tin mining underscores the strong

rapprochement and mutual trust between the Johor royal court and the Arab merchant community. Third, the formal structure of the agreement demonstrates that Arab participation in Johor's economy was not informal or peripheral, but rooted in regulated, state-sanctioned mechanisms. Taken together, the tax holiday, renewal clause and multi-heir liability illustrate a patron–client compact, wherein royal authority exchanged fiscal forbearance and legal certainty for loyalty, investment and performance, consistent with broader Hadrami commercial strategies in the region.

Beyond the al-Junid family, another significant document is a letter dated 6 February 1887 from Syed Husain Muhamed of Palembang addressed to Ungku Abdul Majid Ibrahim. In this letter, Syed Husain alludes to a legendary treasure “the wealth of Qarun” which he believed to be hidden near Gunung Ledang, Kukup, or within the royal family's plantation estates (National Archives of Malaysia, 1887). Although allegorical in tone and speculative in content (see Figure 2), the letter demonstrates how myth and ambition intertwined to stimulate economic initiatives. Syed Husain emphasised the capacity of Sultan Abu Bakar, Ungku Abdul Majid, or Syed Muhamed to uncover and exploit such wealth:

... the treasures and storehouses of Qarun lie in the state of Johor, beneath Gunung Ledang, or nearby, or within the estate of His Highness where new construction is underway, now called Bukit Surga, or within the boundaries of Kukup. Beneath that land, the treasure is buried 40 to 50 depa deep (National Archives of Malaysia, 1887).

Though metaphorical, references to “Qarun's treasure” symbolised the immense potential of Johor's natural resources. Such imagination may have encouraged Sultan Abu Bakar to grant further concessions, including one to Syed Muhamed Ahmad Abdul Rahman al-Sagoff, another prominent Arab merchant. On 15 August 1889, Syed Muhamed was granted a tin mining lease spanning three square miles for 99 years (National Archives of Malaysia, 1889). While specific operational records remain scarce, related documents confirm that he employed the legal services of Donaldson and Burkinshaw, a firm based in Singapore, to manage the concession (Compilation of Miscellaneous Letters Preserved by the Johor State Secretary, 1843–1927).

In sum, the granting of mining concessions to Arab merchants reflects not only the economic openness of the Johor government but also the deeply embedded socio-political and economic ties between the royal court and the Arab diaspora da-



Figure 2. Excerpt from a Letter by Syed Husain Muhamed al-Habsyi of Palembang dated 6 February 1887. Source: *Collection of Miscellaneous Letters Preserved by the Johor State Secretary: 1843–1927*, National Archives of Malaysia, Southern Branch, Johor Bahru.

ting back to the nineteenth century (Alatas, 2017; Abdullah & Hamid, 2023). These archival letters provide evidence of a collaborative economic ecosystem characterised by strategic partnerships between indigenous political elites and international Muslim investors who shared common cultural and religious values. The participation of merchants such as al-Attas, al-Junid and al-Sagoff—who possessed transregional trade networks extending from Singapore to the Middle East—brought financial capital, technical knowledge, and skilled labour. Their contributions positioned Johor within a broader framework of global capitalist expansion rooted in local governance (Esa, 1999a; Mohd Daud, 2022).

This dynamic aligns with Abdullah's (2021) assertion that Arab diasporic networks played a critical role in transmitting knowledge and technology to the colonial periphery, including Johor. Thus, the corpus of royal-Arab correspondence not only represents diplomatic interaction but also substantiates the development of a strategic economic architecture. Under the leadership of Sultan Abu Bakar, this architecture laid the foundations for a modern, progressive, and inclusive economic state,

anchored in Islamic values and responsive to the demands of an interconnected global economy.

ROYAL CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN THE JOHOR COURT AND ARAB MERCHANTS ON AGRICULTURAL ACTIVITIES

Arab merchants also held a prominent position among the Johor royal family, including Sultan Abu Bakar himself, particularly in the realm of agricultural enterprise. One of the most active and influential figures in the 19th century was Syed Muhamed Ahmad Abdul Rahman al-Sagoff. On 16 March 1878 (14 Jumada al-Awwal 1295H), Sultan Abu Bakar granted him a parcel of land specifically designated for agricultural purposes. From a documentary perspective, this royal letter exhibits characteristics closely resembling those found in earlier mining land concession agreements granted to four other Arab merchants.

The agreement was written in *Jawi* script and dated using the Hijri calendar alongside the Gregorian year, signifying the continued presence of Islamic administrative traditions. The Sultan's official seal (*maharaja*) was also affixed to the document. According to the agreement, the land was located "...along the western coastal region of Johor, namely Kukup." While the precise size of the concession was not stated, the land boundaries were described with reference to river landmarks as follows:

Its eastern boundary lies to the left when ascending the Permas River, the western limit extends to the right when ascending the Pontian Besar River, and inland up to the left when ascending the Jeram Batu River, within the Pulau River basin. These borders encompass all the mangrove land along the coast and rivers within this concession area (National Archives of Malaysia, 1878).

However, according to the RACK (Receiver of the Alsagoff Concession Kukup) report in 1924, the total area of land—based on the boundaries outlined in the original concession agreement—was estimated to be between 50,000 to 60,000 acres (General Advisor 86/1922 'A', 30 October 1922; General Advisor A 253/1924, *Brief History of the Alsagoff Concession Kukup*, 25 March 1924). The concession covered approximately 14 square miles, bounded by the sub-districts of Pontian, Rimba Terjun, Sungai Karang, Air Masin, and Serkat (National Archives of Malaysia, CLM 1149/1936, *Annual Report*, 1936). Given this substantial land area, there is little doubt that Syed Muhamed was the Arab merchant with the largest land concession in the Malay Peninsula during that period.

At a glance, the status of the land granted to

Syed Muhamed was articulated as follows:

His Majesty the Maharaja of Johor, Abu Bakar, who holds sovereignty over the state of Johor together with his descendants and rightful heirs, has granted a parcel of land, namely Kukup, to Syed Muhamed bin Ahmad bin Abdulrahman Alsagoff, in perpetuity, to be used for the cultivation of all types of crops, with the exception of opium (*Alsagoff Concession Kukup*, J/PELB (SS 1451/1921)).

Based on the contents of the concession letter, the term to bestow (*mengurniakan*) signifies that the land was granted freely, without any transactional exchange or purchase between the parties. Syed Muhamed was entitled to own and manage the land in perpetuity (*selama-lamanya*). However, the term in perpetuity must be interpreted with caution, as its actual meaning was ambiguous and lacked absolute legal authority. Such ambiguity was common practice at the time, particularly among rulers and local elites, who often did not regard numerical precision or contractual detail as crucial in agreements or commercial dealings. Nonetheless, Syed Muhamed was bound by fourteen specific conditions appended to the concession agreement (Esa, 1999b). Among the key stipulations was the clause that allowed the government to revoke any portion of the land that remained uncultivated. He was required to cultivate at least 300 acres within three years and 1,000 acres within the first twelve years of the concession period (*Alsagoff Concession Kukup*, J/PELB (SS/1451/1921)).

The type of economic activity permitted on the concession land was strictly agricultural, with the explicit exclusion of *apion*, a term referring to cannabis (opium poppy). While Syed Muhamed was prohibited from cultivating *apion*, he was permitted to purchase opium and liquor for his workers and residents within the concession, as stated in Clause 12 of the Kukup Land Concession Agreement. In the event that mineral resources were discovered on the land, ownership would revert to the state. Syed Muhamed could only claim such resources upon formal request and under separate agreements, as outlined in Clause 8. However, no mineral deposits were ever discovered throughout the duration of the concession until its return to the state. The agreement also stipulated that Syed Muhamed was to remit 2.5% of the agricultural produce to the Johor government after the initial ten-year period. However, this clause was later annulled on 16 April 1888 (4 Shaaban 1305) through an official directive from Sultan Abu Bakar, as follows:

...although the abovementioned land, granted in

the name of Syed Mohamed bin Ahmad Alsagoff on 14th Jumada al-Awwal 1295, originally included a clause concerning the payment of taxes, such taxation is hereby waived. No tax shall be imposed for as long as the said land and estate remain under the ownership and rights of Syed Mohamed bin Ahmad Alsagoff or his legitimate heirs, in consideration of the substantial expenditures he has already invested in the said land and estate (*Copy of Letters from the Menteri [1886–1891]*, J/SUK 11, No. 165, National Archives of Malaysia, Southern Branch, Johor Bahru).

From this directive, it is evident that for nearly a decade, Syed Muhamed had personally financed the development of the Kukup concession for agricultural purposes. In this regard, he may be regarded as a central figure in promoting agricultural activities in the Kukup region. Fundamentally, the granting of the Kukup agricultural concession, in tandem with the earlier mining concessions, illustrates the close relationship between Syed Muhamed and Sultan Abu Bakar—akin to that between the Sultan and the four Arab merchants who had previously received mining land concessions.

According to Syed Husain Muhamed al-Habsyi of Palembang, members of the Arab community shared similar personal qualities, particularly in the management of wealth and property. He observed that His Highness the Elder Brother, the Sultan of Johor, or Syed Mohamed al-Sagoff, possessed the necessary conditions to undertake such responsibilities—namely, diligence, affluence, and a sense of justice. These qualities were deemed sufficient to fulfil the requirements of prudent governance, further augmented by what he described as good fortune and divine favour:

Sri Paduka Kekanda Sultan Johor, or Syed Mohamed al-Sagoff, who is capable of carrying out [such tasks], because he possesses the necessary qualities—diligence, wealth, and justice. All these constitute sound governance. Additionally, he is blessed with good fortune and auspiciousness. (*Letter of Syed Husain Muhamed al-Habsyi of Palembang regarding the wealth of Qarun, dated 6 February 1887, File No. S. 132, Collection of Various Letters Kept by the Johor State Secretary 1843–1927*, National Archives of Malaysia, Southern Branch, Johor Bahru).

The confidence in Syed Mohamed's abilities was further affirmed by Sultan Abu Bakar himself, as recorded in his royal correspondence with Sultan Ahmad of Pahang. This acknowledgment illustrates the extent to which Arab individuals, particularly Syed Mohamed al-Sagoff, were trusted not only as economic agents but also as governance partners,

legitimised by personal merit and royal endorsement.

The relationship between Syed Muhamed and Sultan Abu Bakar was further reinforced by Syed Muhamed's role as both financier and financial administrator to the Johor ruler (Reid, 1969; Tate, 1969; Thio, 1971). This arrangement positioned the Sultans of Johor and Pahang as commercial partners of Syed Muhamed, reflecting a complex intersection between royal authority and merchant capital. The evolving relationship between Arab merchants and the Johor royal institution, particularly in the context of land concession ownership, exemplifies a deliberate and strategic transfer of economic power. In this regard, the concept of "patron-client politics" offers a practical analytical framework to understand the reciprocal relationship between Sultan Abu Bakar and Syed Muhamed al-Sagoff. Royal letters functioned not merely as ceremonial instruments, but as both symbolic and practical tools for legitimising land ownership and commercial activity (Esa, 1999b).

Aljunied (2022) emphasises that in the Southeast Asian historical context, the close ties between local political elites and immigrant merchants formed a type of economic symbiosis that ensured both political continuity and economic stability. This interpretation is echoed by Roff (2021), who contends that the Arab community in Malaya was not merely a foreign investor class, but played an active role in shaping both the colonial and postcolonial economic structure through transnational business networks. Consequently, the royal decree bestowing the Kukup Land Concession upon Syed Muhamed stands not only as evidence of a close personal alliance, but also as a testament to the role of Arab merchants as intermediaries bridging global commerce with local power structures. Viewed through the lens of historical documentation, such land concession agreements illuminate how economic power was articulated through soft diplomacy and social relations grounded in trust, loyalty, and mutual benefit.

CONCLUSION

The close reading of nineteenth-century royal correspondence between the Johor court and Arab merchants demonstrates that Arab actors were embedded partners in Johor's economic and political development, especially in mining and agriculture. Figures such as the al-Junid and al-Sagoff families secured formal concessions, tax privileges, and royal patronage that legitimised their ventures and sustained long-term investment. These arrangements

reveal a patron-client compact, whereby Johor's rulers strategically mobilised foreign capital and expertise in return for loyalty and performance.

By situating Arab merchants within these institutionalised frameworks, the study directly challenges colonial-era historiography that has disproportionately portrayed Chinese entrepreneurs as the primary agents of Malaya's extractive economy. The Johor case underscores instead a pluralistic economic landscape in which Arab merchants were not marginal actors but central brokers in connecting Johor to transregional circuits of trade and capital. This reframing contributes to a more inclusive historiography of Southeast Asia by highlighting how diverse communities co-produced economic transformation under royal authority.

Methodologically, the study advances a document-centred approach that treats royal correspondence not simply as ceremonial texts but as economic instruments encoding law, trust, and authority. This perspective demonstrates the potential of archival sources to both complicate and enrich our understanding of state-merchant relations in Southeast Asia.

Finally, the *warkah* between Johor's rulers and Arab entrepreneurs represents a crucial component of Malaysia's documentary heritage. Their systematic cataloguing, digitisation, and open access are not only essential for preserving national memory but also for enabling reproducible, comparative scholarship on economic governance across the Indian Ocean world. In this way, the preservation of these documents extends beyond cultural heritage to inform contemporary debates on identity, policy, and development.

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