

TWO LETTERS FROM THE MAHĀRĀJĀ TO THE KHALĪFAH

A STUDY IN THE EARLY HISTORY OF ISLAM IN THE EAST

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I

Al-Jāhīz, 'Amr b. Baḥr (163/783—255/869), has devoted a long and entertaining chapter on elephants in his magnificent work, *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*, in which we come across the following quotation :—

ذكر الهيثم بن عدى عن أبي يعقوب الثقفي عن عبد الملك بن عمير قال :
رأيت في ديوان معاوية (بعد موته) كتاباً من ملك الصين¹ (فيه : من
ملك الصين¹) الذي على مربطه ألف فيل و بنيت داره بلبن الذهب و الفضة
و الذي تقدمه بنات ألف ملك و الذي له نهران يسقيان الالوه ، الى
معاوية ...¹

("Al-Haytham b. 'Adī has narrated from Abū Ya'qūb al-Thaqafī, he from 'Abd al-Malik b. 'Umayr that he (the last-mentioned) saw in the secretariat (*diwān*) of Mu'āwiyah (after his death) a letter from the king of al-Ṣīn, (in which it was written : "From the King of al-Ṣīn), in whose stables are a thousand elephants, (and) whose palace is built of bricks of gold and silver, who is served by a thousand daughters of the kings, and who possesses two rivers which irrigate aloes plants, to Mu'āwiyah . . .").

Al-Haytham b. 'Adī (114/732-3—207/822-3), who has been quoted by al-Jāhīz, was one of the founders of the science of historiography in Islam. He is reported to have written as many as fifty books on the history, genealogies, biographies and folklore of the Arabs, and on the topography of their new settlements. One of the titles : *Kitāb al-Ta'rīkh 'alā al-Sīnīn* (A Book of History according to Years) seems to suggest that he was the first annalist among the Muslims. Unfortunately none of his works seems to have survived, but some of their extracts have been preserved in the famous histories of al-Balādhurī, al-Ṭabarī and others.²

Not much is known about Abū Ya'qūb (Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm) al-Thaqafī (al-Kūfī), the second link in the chain of transmission (*al-*

isnād) of the above story. But he is well-recognised as a reliable *rāwī* (transmitter of traditions), whose authority has been accepted by Abū Dāwūd, al-Tirmidhī, and al-Nasa'ī, compilers of three out of the six Canonical Collections of Traditions.³ The original narrator of this report, 'Abd al-Malik b. 'Umayr (33/653-4—136/753-4), was one of the learned luminaries, an *imām*, of the Umayyad reign and was envied for his prodigious memory.⁴

Thus, there appears to be no reason to doubt the credentials of the narrators of this interesting report. What a pity that al-Jāhīz has cut his quotation short at the crucial point ! Of course, in the context of his discussions the only relevant portion of this historic letter was the claim of its writer to be the owner of stables of a thousand elephants. But how much more important, from the historical view-point, was the main body of the epistle that was sent by the ruler of al-Ṣīn (al-Hind ?) to the Arab Caliph at such an early date in the history of Islam !

II

Before we try to identify this ruler it should be borne in mind that the term 'al-Hind' as used by the Arab writers of the early mediaeval period signified the region known to Western writers as the Indian Peninsula and Insular India (*Insulinde*) and not the Indian mainland. Arabs knew their Indian neighbours from the earliest times, but only through their maritime trade. The busy ports of the fertile, fragrant and rich peninsula and the archipelago ascribed to India by ancient and mediaeval writers, had in themselves great attraction for the Arab sailors and traders, and were at the same time their ports of call on the traditional eastern trade route extending from the Mediterranean to the South China Sea. After the advent of Islam and the subsequent political expansion of the Arabs the north-western area of this sub-continent, which is now West Pakistan, came within the Arab vortex, but was distinguished by them from the rest of India as 'al-Sind'. Thus their traditional concept of al-Hind, being the Peninsular and Insular India, was retained even after these early conquests. The unique first-hand accounts of the strange experiences of the early Muslim sailors have been collected by the captain-navigator Buzurg b. Ṣhahriyār (fl. 342/953). Sailors' stories of Kawlam (Kollam) on the Malabar coast ; Sarandīb (Sin-hāladvīpa), i.e. Ceylon ; Lanjabālus (Nakkavaram), i.e. Nicobar Islands ; Lāmuri (Lāmbri), Faṣṣūr, Siribizah (Sri Vijaya), in

Sumatra, Kalah (Kalang) on the western coast of the Malayan Peninsula; and of the legendary Arab El Dorado in the southern seas, i.e. the islands of al-Wāqwāq,—are all narrated under the title of 'Aǰā'ib al-Hind Barrihi wa Bahrihi wa Jazā'irihi, 'Marvels of al-Hind: her land, sea, and islands.'⁵ Muṭahhar b. Ṭāhir al-Maqdisī (died after 355/966) in his *Kitāb al-Bad' wa 'l-Ta'riḫ* gives the farthest limits of al-Hind of the early Arab conception, as

مشارك الهند الصين و قشمير و شمالهم السند و جنوبهم بلاد محرقة
مجهولة و بحار و مغاربهم الزنج و الراج و اليمن⁶

("To the east of al-Hind are al-Šīn (China) and Qashmir (Chamorris) (i.e. modern Philippines),^{6a} to the north is al-Sind, to the south are charred (volcanic?) and unknown lands and seas, and to the west are al-Zanj (i.e. the Negro-land), al-Rānij (lit. 'the Coconut Islands')^{6b} and al-Yaman (Yemen)." He appears to be emphatic on extending the eastern limits of al-Hind right up to the borders of China for, in another place, he writes,

أما جروم الهند فجزائر و سواحل حتى تتصل بأرض الصين⁷

("As for the torrid zone of al-Hind, it consists of islands and coastal lands which meet the territory of al-Šīn"). But all the Arab writers are not agreed on this point. Abū Dulaf Mis'ar b. Muḥalhal, who came to the East in 942 A.C. as an emissary of the Sāmānid ruler Naṣr b. Aḥmad to the court of China and whose memoirs of the voyage have been preserved only in the excerpts quoted by Yāqūt (576/1178—626/1229) and al-Qazwīnī (605/1208—682, 1283), would extend the eastern limit of al-Hind only up to the Malayan Peninsula for, according to him Kalah was the first of the cities of al-Hind, on the way from China, while Multan was the last⁸. But most other writers, like Ibn Khurradādhbih (d. circa 280/893), Ibn al-Faqīh (fl. 290/903), Ibn Rustah (fl. III/Xth century), Yāqūt and al-Qazwīnī, include Qamār, or Qimār, (Khmer, modern Cambodia) in the region of al-Hind.⁹ Reinaud has perhaps best summed up this position when he says, "the Arabs extended India as far as the Java archipelago".¹⁰

The Gangetic Valley, which was the heart of India and the historic centre of her civilization, was almost a *terra incognita* for the Arabs of the period under discussion. They seem to have hovered around the periphery of the vast Indian world for cen-

tries without penetrating inland for fear of danger to their lives and wealth. The above-mentioned al-Qazwīnī, writing at the time when the Muslim arms had started sweeping across the mainland of India, has expressed these fears which appear to have persisted up to his day. Writing about the rich trade of al-Hind he says,

إِنَّ التَّجَّارَ لَا يَصِلُونَ إِلَّا إِلَى أَوَائِلِهَا وَأَمَّا أَقْصَاهَا فَتَقَلَّمَا يَصِلُ إِلَيْهَا

أَهْلُ بِلَادِنَا لِأَنَّهُمْ كَفَّارٌ يَسْتَبِيحُونَ النَّفْسَ وَالْمَالَ.¹¹

("The traders reach only its coasts, or borders (lit. 'the beginnings'). Rarely do the people of our country reach its extremities, because the inhabitants are infidels who kill and plunder.") The very name of the great river Gangā, after which the valley is named, rarely occurs in Arab literature before Maḥmūd Ghaznawī's invasion of India in the eleventh century. Among those few who did not fail to mention it, is al-Mas'ūdī, "a man of the tenth century with a fifteenth-century renaissance mind", who himself had visited al-Hind in 303/915, and stayed there for some months. But it appears quite significant that the name of the river in his writings takes its Greek form جنجس (*Janjis*) i.e. Ganges, which fact is an evident pointer to its origin.¹² Even al-Idrīsī, "the most distinguished geographer and cartographer of the Middle Ages", writing a century and a half after Maḥmūd's invasion, appears to be ignorant about this river which he too calls by its Greek name. On his map it flows down southwards and passing through the peninsula (nearer to the western coast) discharges itself into the sea near Jirbāttan, not very far from Cape Comorin!¹³

Of course, after Maḥmūd's invasion and the subsequent establishment of the Muslim Empire on the Indian mainland, the situation radically changed: the Gangetic Valley and its extension, Northern India, monopolised Muslims' attention and the Peninsular and Insular Indias, especially the latter, fell into oblivion. Consequently, the connotation of the term 'al-Hind' changed and became the source of much confused thinking on the subject.

But that is not the only difficulty that we encounter in the course of our enquiries on the subject. It is well known that the Arab historical writers do not take notice of the happenings outside the confines of the Muslim Empire. Even the activities of their own co-religionists and compatriots, which, we know from other sources, were very extensive especially in the field of international

commerce, are totally ignored by them. On the other hand, the Indian, whether he lived in his homeland or colonised in the islands overseas, cared little about recording history, for the world was to him an illusion (*māyā*). But fortunately for these Indian islands, they had the Chinese as their eastern neighbours. The great Chinese dynastic histories and Chinese travel accounts contain valuable bits of information about the history of these islands in spite of the general disdain of the Chinese for the foreign "barbarians". And in the official history of the T'ang dynasty (618-907 A.C.) we get an important clue.

Hsin T'ang Shu (The New T'ang Annals) records that in the Shang-yūan period, i.e. in 674-5 A.C. Kha-lang¹⁴ 訶陵 which was the leading state of Insular India of those days, elected a lady Si-mo or Sira-maka as its ruler. The country, we are told, was so peaceful and prosperous under her rule that even things dropped on the road were not lifted. The contemporary Arab ruler, who was evidently no other than Mu'āwiyah I (41/661-61/680), the founder of not only the Umayyad dynasty but also of the Muslim navy, heard of this and sent a bag of gold to be laid within her frontiers. It lay there for three years untouched. The passersby avoided it like an evil thing. But one day the young prince, the heir to the throne, accidentally stumbled on it. When this was reported to the queen she was so angry that she wanted to kill the prince. Her ministers interceded and then the queen said, "Your fault lies in your feet, therefore, it will be enough punishment if they are cut off." The ministers interceded again and she was finally persuaded to have only the toes of the Crown Prince cut off. According to the Chinese chronicler, when the ruler of the Arabs heard this he "became afraid" and dared not attack her country.¹⁵

The above story, in spite of its anecdotal character, adds a new dimension to our conception of the history of Islam and, for that reason, deserves our keen attention. This writer has discussed it at some length elsewhere.¹⁶ For the purposes of the present investigation the Chinese story raises a number of questions. Was the letter of the ruler, presumably, of al-Hind in any way connected with the event recorded in the Chinese chronicles? Probably yes. But most probably Queen Si-mo or Sira-maka did not write that letter, because it was from a certain *king*. Was the writer, then, in any way related to her? Was he the poor Crown Prince

who lost his toes, but must have gained his throne after the death of his mother? Or, was he a rival king of one of the neighbouring Malaysian states who incited the ambitious Caliph to invade Khalang? Did Mu'āwiyah send those gold-bearing emissaries to make preliminary reconnaissance of the country? Did he give up the idea as he was favourably impressed by the justice of the Malaysian Queen? We do not have satisfactory answers to these questions. We are just left guessing on these and similar other points, till the missing portions of the letter are found in some other writings of al-Jāhiz, only a few of the 128 books from whose facile pen have so far been published.¹⁷ And would that the writings of al-Haytham b. 'Adī himself could be retrieved!

However, the extract from al-Haytham's lost book, notwithstanding its mutilation, and the Chinese story, in spite of its anecdotal style, both fit in the pattern of Muslim navigational activities which even in those early days of Islam extended from the Mediterranean to the South China Sea.

III

At this stage of our enquiry it is worth recalling that a letter with a very similar form of address was written by a *malik al-amlāk* ('the king of kings'), i.e. the Mahārājā of al-Hind to another Umayyad Caliph, 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Azīz (99/717—102/720). Fortunately this letter has fared better. Its main body, too, has been preserved by Ibn 'Abd Rabbih (246/860—328/940), the Spanish versatile genius, in his book *al-'Iqd al-Farīd* ('The Unique Necklace'), which "contains something on every subject".¹⁸ In the chapter on the Royal Epistles Ibn 'Abd Rabbih quotes an earlier writer, Nu'aym b. Ḥammād (d. 288/842-3), as follows:—

نعيم بن حماد قال : بعث ملك الهند إلى عمر بن عبدالعزيز كتاباً فيه : من ملك الاملاك الذى هو ابن ألف ملك و الذى تحته بنت ألف ملك و الذى فى مربطه ألف فيل و الذى له نهران ينبتان العود و الآلوه و الجوز و الكافور الذى يوجد ريحه على مسيرة اثني عشر ميلاً إلى ملك العرب الذى لا يشرك بالله شيئاً أما بعد فأتى قد بعثت إليك بهدية و ماهى بهدية و لكنّها تحية و أحببت أن تبعث إلى رجلاً يعلمنى لإسلام و يوقننى على حدوده [او 'يعلمنى و يفهمنى لإسلام']¹⁹ و السلام -

("Nu'aym b. Ḥammād wrote, 'The King of al-Hind sent a letter to 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Azīz, which ran as follows: From the King of Kings, who is the descendant of a thousand kings, whose consort, too, is the descendant of a thousand kings, in whose stables are a thousand elephants, and in whose territories are two rivers which irrigate plants of aloes, odoriferous herbs, nutmeg, and camphor, whose fragrance spreads to the distance of twelve miles,—to the King of the Arabs, who does not associate other gods with God. I have sent to you a gift, which is not much of a gift but (just) a greetings and I wish that you may send to me someone who might teach me Islam and instruct me in its Laws [or as in another version: 'might teach me Islam and explain it to me.']" Peace!)

Nu'aym b. Ḥammād, who is quoted by Ibn 'Abd Rabbih, was one of the founders of the *ḥadīth*-movement in Islamic literature. He is reputed to be the first scholar who arranged the Traditions according to their *rāwīs* (transmitters) and, thus, compiled the first *al-Musnad*. He was one of the champions of orthodoxy and died in prison for refusing to accept the Mu'tazilite (Rationalist) doctrine that the Qur'ān was not the Uncreated Word of God but was only His created work. The original writings of Nu'aym b. Ḥammād, too, have been lost. As far as our present knowledge goes, only one of his numerous works, viz, *Kitāb al-Fitan wa 'l-Malāḥim* ('On Civil Disorders and Battles'), has been preserved, and that, too, in an abridged form.²⁰

The above letter has been quoted also by Ibn Taghrī-Berdī (813/1410—874/1470) in his excellent work *al-Nujūm al-Zāhirah fī Mulūk Miṣr wa 'l-Qāhirah*, on the authority of a very reliable Traditionalist of comparatively later times, Ibn 'Asākir (499/1105—571/1176). In Ibn Taghrī-Berdī's version there is the interesting addition of one more sentence in the body of the letter, which is as follows:—

وقد أهديت لك هدية من المسك والعنبر والتد و الكافور فاقبلها

فإنما أنا أخوك في الإسلام²¹

("I have sent you a present of musk, amber, incense and camphor. Please accept it, for I am your brother in Islam.")

This careful historian also helps us in ascertaining the date of this letter. He records it under the events that took place in the year of the Hijrah 99, i.e. 717-8 A.C.. Now, 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Azīz acceded to the Caliphate in Ṣafar (the second month), 99 A.H.,

September-October 717, and, though he acted as the one in a hurry and, as we shall see later, met with extraordinary success in a surprisingly short time, yet his missionary activities must have taken at least some time to become mature; we can, therefore, safely assume that the letter was written sometime in the later half of 718 A.C.

IV

The above document throws some new light on the history of the propagation of Islam. To appreciate its significance in this regard we must briefly recapitulate the well-known facts, as well as the widely-circulated fiction, concerning this rather controversial subject.

The phenomenal growth of Muslims' political power in the first century of their era is generally equated with the spread of Islam in those dominions. This fallacious presumption has further led to the myth of Islam being spread by the sword. But the facts of history seem to tell us an altogether different story.

The Umayyads (41/661—133/750) to whom after the great 'Umar (13/634—23/644) goes the distinction of spreading the Muslim empire far and wide, were mainly interested in the Arabianization rather than the Islamization of their conquered peoples. Under their rule acceptance of the faith was not sufficient for a non-Arab to enjoy the privileges of a Muslim citizen. He had to find for himself a place in the Muslim society by becoming affiliated as a client (*mawlā*) to one of the Arab tribes. Under strong viceroys like Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf the derogatory poll-tax (*jizyah*) was levied on them, and they were asked to pay heavier land-revenue, *khara'j*, in place of the specified tithe, '*ushr*, that a Muslim had to pay.²² The question of the administrative necessity and the fiscal wisdom, or otherwise, of these measures is not relevant to the subject under discussion. But we must admit that these measures were remarkably efficient in achieving the objectives of the Umayyad Caliphs. The Levant, which was the seat of the Umayyad government and the source of their support and strength, was fully Arabianized very early in their reign, but to this day among its constituent states are Lebanon, with a non-Muslim majority; Syria, Iraq, and Egypt having powerful non-Muslim minorities, and Palestine, which had a strong Jewish nucleus that was turned into the Zionist state of Israel.²³

It was only during the short reign of 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Azīz (September-October 717—February 720) that those impediments to Islamization were removed and the pent-up missionary zeal of the early Muslims was released. The pious Caliph seemed bent upon making amends for the shortcomings of his dynasty in as short a time as possible. The extent and speed of his proselytisation work is amazing. In the Far West, mass conversion to Islam took place in the Maghrib (Morocco, Algeria and Tunis) among the Berbers. In the North-West, attempts were made to convert the Byzantine Emperor Leo III, himself. In the North-East, missions were sent beyond the Oxus which achieved remarkable success among the Turks. Remote and isolated Tibetans themselves sent a deputation asking for Muslim missionaries for their country.²⁴ South-East could not be neglected. The rulers of al-Sind and al-Hind were invited to accept Islam. The ruler of al-Sind, Jay Siva (or Jay Sinha, according to *Chach Nāmah*),²⁵ son of the famous Dāhir, who had valiantly fought Muḥammad b. Qāsim, accepted this invitation and so did some other rulers of the East. Reporting this last incident al-Balādhurī (d. 279/892) writes as follows:—

فكتب الى الملوك يدعوهم الى الاسلام و الطاعة على أن يملكهم
ولهم ما للمسلمين وعليهم ما عليهم و قد كانت بلغتهم سيرته و مذهبه فأسلم

جيشبه ("حيشه" في الأصل) و الملوك و تسموا باسماء العرب²⁶

["He ('Umar b. 'Abd al-'Azīz) wrote to the kings inviting them to accept Islam and owe allegiance (to the Muslim state), on the condition that they would retain their kingship (over their respective territories) and would be entitled to all the rights enjoyed by the Muslims and bound by the obligations that are laid on them. These kings had already received reports of Caliph 'Umar's good disposition and of his religion. Jay Siva *and other kings*, therefore, became Muslims and took Arab names."]

Al-Balādhurī does not specify who were "the other kings", and over what countries they ruled. But as he mentions this event in the context of the Sind campaigns, it has been presumed that all "the other kings", too, belonged to the Indus Valley. Five years before 'Umar's accession to the Caliphate, Sind was conquered by Muḥammad b. Qāsim, and Dāhir whose kingdom appears to have extended up to the borders of Kashmir was killed fighting against the young Arab general. Therefore, it may be presumed that after

the conquest the Arabs had parcelled out the vast territories among several local chiefs, and had kept only the central control in their hands. However, as al-Sind (the Indus Valley, in its broader sense, almost comprising the territory that is now West Pakistan) and al-Hind (the rest of the Indian continent including the "Indian" Archipelago) are geographically contiguous and culturally close to each other (at the period under discussion the Indian Archipelago was ruled by the Indian colonisers), they were sometimes confused with each other in Arabic writings. It may, therefore, be surmised that when al-Balādhuri talked of the "other kings" he meant to include not only the chiefs of the Indus Valley but also the remoter eastern monarchs among whom must be our Malaysian Mahārājā, whose letter was quoted by al-Balādhuri's senior contemporary, Nu'aym b. Ḥammād. But there is another hitch in such a surmise. Ibn al-Athīr²⁷ (555/1160—630/1233) and Ibn Taghri-Berdi²⁸ have recorded this incident in the same words as those of al-Balādhuri, but with the important addition that they have placed it in the year of the Hijrah 101, while as we already know the Malaysian Mahārājā had accepted Islam in A.H. 99.

However, the conversion of Jay Siva and other eastern kings as reported by al-Balādhuri, Ibn al-Athīr, and Ibn Taghri-Berdi, and of the Malaysian Mahārājā as demonstrated by the document under discussion, emphasise the thoroughness with which the pious Caliph pursued his policy of proselytization.

But how is it that the process of Islamization that got started in South and Southeast Asia so early as at the turn of the first century of the Hijrah seems to have petered out without leaving any visible trace behind? It is a complex problem and at the same time vital for the clear understanding of the history of Islam in the regions of the Indian Ocean, i.e. Pakistan, India-Bharat, Indonesia and Malaya. At the moment we can only raise the question and at the most give very broad hints on the lines of which, we feel, further investigation can be pursued.

The immediate reason for this setback must be sought in the reversal of 'Umar's policy by his successors and their resumption of their old ways with renewed vigour. In the case of Jay Siva al-Balādhuri and Ibn al-Athīr state that during the reign of Hishām (105/724—125/743), in the year of the Hijrah 107, the local Arab governor, al-Junayd b. 'Abd al-Raḥmān, betrayed him and broke the solemn pledges given by 'Umar II. Jay Siva was disgusted, he

denounced Islam, fought against al-Junayd and was killed in the battle.²⁹ The fate of the other faithful monarchs of the East is not recorded by any Arab historian. However, their silence is itself quite eloquent. Neglected and betrayed by their disdainful co-religionists and isolated and removed from the centres of Islam by natural factors, they were lost to Islam.

These events clearly show that the propagation of the Faith cannot be the business of the State, for, it (State) is mainly a coercive force, it cannot convert the people's mind. 'Umar's short reign was the exception that proved the general rule.

It is also evident that proselytization is a hard job demanding the harnessing of specialised skills, supreme determination, devotion and dedication to a single mission in life, that of redeeming a "lost soul". To expect all this from an average soldier or sailor, statesman, or salesman, is asking too much from him. It is the work of a missionary, a *muballigh*. In the history of Islam there were two powerful, efficiently organised, and highly successful missionary movements: the 'Alid *da'wah* and the *Şūfi ʔarīqah*. For the mass conversion to Islam al-Sind and al-Hind had to wait for the maturing of these movements in their area. In due course of time first the 'Alid *da'wah* and then the *Şūfi ʔarīqah* played their proselytizing rôle in the whole region of the Indian Ocean.³⁰

V

The form of address used in the two letters, which appears to have evoked the special interest of the Arab writers, is typical of the epistolary style of the Malaysian monarchs. It reminds us of the letters written by the powerful rulers of Aceh in North Sumatra to Queen Elizabeth I and to King James II. As the power of these Malaysian kings shrank, the claims made by them in these introductory parts of their letters grew, till by the nineteenth century these used to run into several pages! The verbosity, bombast and pagan exaggeration of these royal letters have been condemned by the English historian of Sumatra in these, rather exaggerated, terms, "It is difficult to conceive how any people so far advanced in civilization as to be able to write, could display such evidence of barbarism."³¹

But in the present case this rather naïve epistolary style is likely to prove helpful to the students of history. Let us, therefore, have a second look at these letters and try to analyse some of their

characteristics.

(1) The first characteristic that demands our attention is the remarkable similarity that exists between the forms of address in the two letters. The few apparent differences, too, can be ascribed to the Arab copyists of the manuscripts in question rather than to the original writers of these letters. It appears that some expressions were left out by the copyists, more so in the mutilated letter that has reached us through al-Jāhīz. There is only one structural difference: in place of ملك الذى تحمده بنات ألف ملك ('who is served by a thousand daughters of the kings') of the first letter, we find الذى تحته بنت ألف ملك ('whose consort is the daughter of a thousand kings') in the second letter. This difference, too, can be traced back to the copyist. In the Arabic script تحمده and تحته, and بنت and بنات or بنت, are easily interchangeable. Obviously the adjectival clause as used in the second letter is the more plausible and correct version.

(2) The title '*malik al-amlāk*' (the king of kings) used in the second letter is evidently the translation of the Sanskrit title *mahārājā*, which figures prominently in the Ligor Inscription of North Malaya, dated A.C. 775, and which was made famous by the Arab geographical writers who usually call the Malaysian regions, *Mamlakat al-Mahrāj* or *Jazā'ir al-Mahrāj*, i.e. the territory or the islands of the Mahārājā. They seem to know the meaning of the Sanskrit term and would like to show their knowledge of it. For instance, Ibn Rustah says,—let us quote him a little extensively, for this statement of the tenth century encyclopaedist throws some light on the subject under discussion—,

و تفسير المهرج ملك الملوك و ليس يعدّ في ملوك الهند أعظم منه
لأنّه في جزائر و لا يعلم ملك أكثر خيراً منه و لا أقوى و أكثر دخلاً
و يقال أنّ دخل قمار الديوك يبلغ له في كلّ يوم خمسين منّاً ذهباً³²

("And al-Mahrāj means 'the king of kings'. None of the kings of al-Hind is greater than he, because he rules over (extensive) islands. None of the kings is reputed to have greater prosperity or power, or more revenues than he. It is said that the revenues from the tax on cock-fighting reaches to fifty maunds of gold per day!")

Malik (meaning 'the King') has two plural forms: *amlāk* and *mulūk*. The former is used in Mahārājā's letter, which reminds us of the following *ḥadīth*:

أخضع الأسماء عند الله ملك الأملاك

("The vilest and most abasing of names for man and the effectual to bring him into a state of humility and humiliation, in the estimation of God, is *malik al-amlāk*, "king of kings".) Evidently this *ḥadīth* refers to *Shāhanshāh*, the title of the Persian Emperors, which is synonymous with the Sanskrit Mahārājā. (Vide Lane's *Lexicon* and *Tāj al-'Arūs*, s.v. خضع and ملك).

(3) The Malaysian Mahārājās took special pride in their stables of a thousand elephants. This reminds us of the experience of a modern archaeologist, Dr. F. M. Schnitger, who has done extensive excavation on the Sumatran sites of the early mediaeval period. The spirit of al-Jāhīz tempts us to quote from Dr. Schnitger's valuable report at some length. He writes, "The temples of Muara Takus are probably the graves of royal personages. Malays say the Hindoo ruler was transformed into an elephant, and for this reason great herds of elephants regularly visit the ruins to do homage to the spirit of their departed ancestor. Close to the temples is a shallow ford, which these elephants cross whenever they descend from Mount Suligi to the plains. It is remarkable that since time immemorial the stupa court has been their favourite playground, where they walk about and disport themselves all night long by the light of the moon. During the excavations of April, 1935, we were able to verify this strange phenomenon from personal experience."³³

(4) The island of Sumatra and the Malayan Peninsula have been famous for their gold and silver since antiquity. Ptolemy and other Greek geographers talk of the Golden Chersonese in this region, and of Argyre ('the city of silver') in the neighbouring Yava island. Rāmāyana, Mahābhārata, and Kathāsaritsāgara wax eloquent when they describe the riches of these islands, which they call *Suvarnadwīpa* (Island of Gold).³⁴ Arab writers of the tenth century, Abū Zayd al-Sīrāfī (fl. 303/916) and al-Mas'ūdī tell us about the "golden bricks", which the Mahārājā of Zābaj used to throw every day in the ponds of his palace.³⁵

In view of the above evidence we can say that the Mahārājā was perhaps not exaggerating too much when he boasted of a palace built of gold and silver bricks.

(5) Aloes, nutmeg, camphor, and other odoriferous herbs and spices are indigenous to Malaysia. Their fragrance spread as far as

the Iberian Peninsula and attracted the Portuguese and Spanish adventurers to these distant islands.

(6) The two rivers mentioned in these letters must be the Jambi and the Musi rivers of Sumatra. On these rivers stood the cities of Jambi and Sri Vijaya (Palembang), which at different times served as the capitals of the great empire known as Sri Vijaya, and which are mentioned by the Arab geographers under the names Jābah and Siribizah, respectively.³⁶

VI

References in the Chinese dynastic histories, the travel accounts of the Chinese pilgrims collected by I-Ching, and the stone inscriptions found at different places in South Sumatra, the neighbouring island of Bangka and North Malaya—all this evidence shows that the Sri Vijayan Empire of Sumatra and Malaya was at the height of its glory and power in the period extending from the second half of the seventh to the end of the eighth century A.C.³⁷ According to I-Ching, who visited this part of the world in 671 A.C., and again in 685, when he stayed here for four years, Sri Vijaya and Kha-lang were not only great centres of maritime trade, but were also great seats of learning. He recommended that if a Chinese pilgrim wished to go to Nālanda (Bihar) to acquire knowledge, he should first stay at Sri Vijaya for one or two years and learn the proper rules before proceeding to India. From his memoirs, it appears that many Chinese pilgrims were already acting likewise.³⁸

Though the high stage of civilization reached by Sumatra and Malaya of the seventh and eighth centuries has a bearing on the composition of the letters under discussion, yet what is of particular interest to us in the context of our subject, is their religious life.

The archaeological evidence and the Chinese writings show that from the first or second up to the beginning of the fifth century A.C. Hinduism, especially of the Saiva cult, was universally accepted in these islands, when Hīnayāna Buddhism was introduced here by Gunavarman. By the time I-Ching visited this part of the world Hīnayanism had become the dominant religion here, as is evidenced by I-Ching's own statement and corroborated by the inscriptions of the period. In I-Ching's times, i.e. the close of the seventh century A.C., there were only a few followers of the Mahāyāna. But the great change-over to the Mahāyāna started

early in the eighth century, when Vajrabodhi, the great South Indian preacher of this faith, went from Ceylon to China along with his disciple, Amoghavajra, and on his way stopped for five months at Sri Vijaya.³⁹ Thus, Malaysia must be seething with religious controversy between the Hīnayāna and the Mahāyāna, when Islam appeared on the scene. The spirit of religious enquiry thus germinated by this controversy is eloquently evident in the letter sent by the Malaysian monarch to 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Aziz,— and at this stage of our investigations we can safely conclude that this monarch was no other than the ruler of Sri Vijaya.

This must be the time of intense activity in Sri Vijaya, not only in the religious but also in the diplomatic field. In 716 A.C. an embassy from She-li-fo-she (Sri Vijaya) visited China. We have seen above that in 718 a letter with gifts of amber, musk and camphor was sent to the Arab Caliph. In 724 and again in 728 embassies were sent to the Chinese court. The account of the embassy of 724 is significant for us in more than one way. We are told that among the presents sent to the Chinese Emperor was a *Ts'eng-ch'i* 增 or 層期 (from Arabic *Zanjī*, meaning 'a Negro') slave-girl.⁴⁰ Evidently the Sri Vijayan ruler got this African slave-girl through his newly found Arab relationship, and the Arabic word used by the Chinese chronicler is an unmistakable evidence of this Arab link.

This Chinese chronicler also records the name of the ruler of Sri Vijaya who sent these precious gifts. He is called She-li-t'o-lo-pa-mo (Srindevavarman).⁴¹ Does it mean that in 724 A.C. the Sri Vijayan Mahārājā had already renounced Islam like his contemporary Rājā of Sind? This is not at all improbable. It is well-known to the students of Southeast Asian history that during the second half of the eighth century A.C. Mahāyāna Buddhism swept through the length and breadth of Malaysia. It found its most beautiful expression in the blossoming-forth of the Javanese art during the period between 760 and 820 A.C., which culminated in the building of the magnificent *vihāra* of Borobudur. Where Vajrabodhi, Amoghavajra, and a host of other monks coming from Nālanda and other centres of Mahāyāna Buddhism in India, succeeded, Islam's case went by default.

VII

Al-Haytham b. 'Adī's report of a letter sent by a monarch of

Insular India to Mu'āwiyah (41/661—61/680), and *Hsin T'ang Shu's* story of the Arab ruler's intention (in about 674 A.C.) of invading Kha-lang, an important state in *Nan-yang* (South Seas), show the farthest extent of Muslim political ambitions and diplomatic activities in the first century of the Hijrah. They also demonstrate the strength of their newly formed navy. The resounding victories won by their Mediterranean-based western fleet against the mightiest naval power of those times is not unknown.⁴² The above two reports coming from two opposite directions give us a glimpse of their hitherto elusive eastern fleet, which must have been based in their home-waters of the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf.

But the spread of Islam was not at all concomitant with the expansion of Arabs' political power and the growth of their armed strength. The apostasy of Rājā Jay Siva (or Jay Sinha) of Sind, in 107/726, and the apparent failure of the attempt made by Mahārājā Srindevavarman, in 99/718, to spread Islam in his fabulously rich dominions of Sri Vijaya, show the weakness of Muslim missionary activities.

The two letters, in spite of their gross inadequacies, tell us quite a bit about the early history of the Muslims—their victories as well as their failures. The present study of these two letters is still more inadequate. But it is hoped that these very shortcomings will arouse enough interest among the scholars of Islam, and of Southeast Asia, to pull the history of Islam in the East out of the quagmire of insolent indifference. Up till now Islamic history has meant the history of Muslim kings building empires over the territories west of the Bay of Bengal. The meeker Muslims living east of this tempestuous bay, numbering more than one-third of the total Muslim population of the world, and having the proud possession of such lands as the eastern wing of Pakistan, the Malayan Peninsula and the Indonesian Archipelago, which are destined to play increasingly important rôle in the world of tomorrow, are up till now forgotten by the historian and sociologist of Islam, and forsaken. This lop-sided view of Islamic history (and sociology) has lasted too long. It has to come to an end. The sooner it comes the better it will be.

