



Illustration 1. Map of Sumatra Island. F. Valentijn, 1726.

## Letter from the King of Johor, Abdul Jalil Shah IV (r. 1699-1720), to Governor-General Abraham van Riebeeck, 26 April 1713

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sejarah  
nusantara



## 1 Introduction

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BY PETER BORSCHBERG

The old Sultanate of Johor, which is sometimes also referred to as the Johor-Riau Sultanate, was founded in the first half of the sixteenth century by the deposed Sultan of Melaka and his heirs. This was how it was later also seen by the early European colonial powers in the region. Johor was just one of the polities competing to assert its role as the heir to Melaka. Until the end of the sixteenth century, its ruler was sometimes referred to as the ‘Emperor of the Malay Kings’.<sup>1</sup>

At the zenith of its prestige and authority between the late sixteenth and the early eighteenth century, the Johor-Riau sultanate commanded the allegiance of peoples who lived across spread across an impressive geographical area spanning the southern portions of the Malay Peninsula, the Riau Archipelago (including present-day Singapore), the Anambas, Tambelan and Natuna island groups, a region around the Sambas River on south-western Borneo and Siak in central-eastern

Sumatra.<sup>2</sup> It also claimed as its dependencies the peoples ruled by the rulers of Kampar, the *bendahara* of Pahang and Terengganu. Among its early seventeenth-century allies was the ruler of Champa, whose authority covered parts of present-day southern Vietnam. The ruler of Champa had converted to Islam and entered into formal relations with Johor in or around 1606, and close relations were maintained thereafter for several decades.<sup>3</sup>

The complexity of the population mix as well as the geographical reach of the Johor-Riau sultanate shaped the nature of this sprawling polity and helps explain two facets of particular interest to the present context. The first point is that the Johor-Riau sultanate was politically complex and arguably multi-polar. It was characteristic of Malay polities of the pre-modern period that rulers focused on people, not on land or territories, and allegiance structures proved fluid.<sup>4</sup> This is something European observers at the time found particularly challenging to grasp. Because of the fluidity of personal allegiances, there were also many grey areas in the geographical compass of a given polity, especially at the fringes: *datu* and local overlords were known to pay tribute and allegiance to more than one overlord at the same time. A close reading of Dutch-language materials shows that one of the problem areas which had emerged between the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and Johor in the first two decades of the eighteenth century had to do with one such great

<sup>1</sup> P. Borschberg, “Jacques de Coutre as a Source for the Early 17th Century History note of Singapore, the Johor River, and the Straits”, *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 81.2 (2008), 90 note 97; Borschberg, *The Singapore and Melaka Straits: Violence, Security and Diplomacy in the 17th Century*. Singapore and Leiden: NUS Press and KITLV Press, 2010, 226, 323 note 155.

<sup>2</sup> M. A. P. Meilink-Roelofs, *Asian Trade and European Influence in the Indonesian Archipelago between 1500 and about 1630*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1962, 139, described a more limited expanse of the Johor sultan’s authority.

<sup>3</sup> Concerning Champa in the early 17th century, see also I.A. Taveres Mourão, *Portugueses em Terras do Dai-Viêt (Cochinchina e Tun Kim), 1615-1660*. Macao: Instituto Português do Oriente and Fundação Oriente, 2005, 40-7.

<sup>4</sup> A. C. Milner, *Kerajaan: Malay Political Culture on the Eve of Colonial Rule*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1982, 6.



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area known as Patapahan. The VOC claimed it paid annual tribute to the Minangkabau 'Emperor' in Sumatra while the Johor Sultan insisted that the people of Patapahan fell under his rule.<sup>5</sup>

The Johor-Riau sultanate had maintained generally friendly relations with the VOC since the early 1600s dating back to an *ad hoc* alliance formed between Sultan Ala'udin Ri'ayat Shah III and the Dutch admiral Jacob van Heemskerck (1567-1607). Johor was among the first Asian powers to dispatch a diplomatic mission to the Dutch Republic in 1603.<sup>6</sup> When the surviving members of the Johor embassy returned with the fleet of Admiral Matelieff three years later, two formal treaties between Johor and the VOC were ratified in May and September 1606.<sup>7</sup>

The close of the seventeenth century saw the assassination on 3 September 1699 of the eccentric and heirless Mahmud Shah II (1685-1699), the last Johor ruler of the Melaka dynastic line. On the advice of the late Sultan Mahmud's uncle, the *Temenggong* of Muar, the *orang kaya* decided to proclaim Mahmud's cousin, the *Bendahara* (Treasurer) Abdul Jalil, heir to the throne of Johor. He thereafter ruled as Abdul Jalil Shah IV (r. 1699-1720). But in some quarters in Johor, there were doubts about this choice and some seized the opportunity to stir up trouble. The *Orang Laut* were dissatisfied because they thought the elevation of the *bendahara* to sultan had not been conducted in the proper manner.<sup>8</sup> The Bugis, who were already well established in Johor and had distinguished themselves during the Jambi Wars in

the second half of the seventeenth century, seized the opportunity presented by this succession crisis to claim more power for the Bugis Raja Muda (alias Yang di Pertuan Muda, the 'junior king'). The widespread uncertainty and unhappiness over the installation of the former *bendahara* as the new ruler of Johor had resulted in several uprisings which fuelled more uncertainty and seriously threatened Johor-Riau from within. Moreover, Siamese naval action off the coast of Terengganu, supposedly targeted against piracy, put Johorese officials on their toes, spurred the strengthening of fortifications (especially on and around Bintan) and aroused the anxiety that Johor might soon become the target of a fresh naval campaign by Siam.<sup>9</sup>

These considerations led up to the more immediate context of the present document. At the beginning of the second decade of the eighteenth century, the long-standing and cordial relationship between the VOC and the Johor-Riau Sultanate had come under strain. The immediate flashpoint in these strained relations were divergent interpretations of the wording of Article 3 of the VOC-Johor Treaty of 1689.<sup>10</sup> The Raja Muda objected to Dutch free burghers from Melaka entering the Siak River region to trade, above all to their presence in Patapahan. Article 4 of the 1689 treaty permitted 'ships from Melaka to call and trade at Patapahan for a fixed duty payable to the Johor *shahbandar*. The Johorese side argued that Article 3 stipulated that the right to come to trade in Siak was reserved for the VOC and not

<sup>5</sup> Andaya, L.Y., *The Kingdom of Johor, 1641-1728: Economic and Political Developments*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1975, 222-223.

<sup>6</sup> Borschberg, *The Singapore and Melaka Straits*, 122.

<sup>7</sup> F.W. Stapel and J.E. Heeres, ed., "Corpus Diplomaticum Neerlandico-Indicum. Verzameling van politieke contracten en verdere verdragen door de Nederlanders in het Oosten gesloten, van privilegiebrieven, aan hen verleend, enz.", eerste deel (1596-1650), *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde van Nederlandsch Indië*, 57 (1907), 45-47.

<sup>8</sup> Concerning this episode, see E. Netscher, *De Nederlanders in Djohor en Siak*. Batavia: Bruining & Wijt, 1870, 47 et seq.

<sup>9</sup> Andaya, *The Kingdom of Johor*, 217-218.

<sup>10</sup> Netscher, *De Nederlanders in Djohor en Siak*, 46.



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Illustration 2. Palace Sultanate Johor, 2010.

for the Melaka free burghers, and that the people of Patapahan were subjects of Johor. The VOC disagreed, arguing that the people of Patapahan paid tribute to the Minangkabau ‘Emperor’ and not Johor. Tension rose on both sides and each impounded commercial vessels under various pretexts. Keen to settle the matter, the VOC dispatched a negotiating team to Johor to seek a way out of the impasse and at the same time negotiate a new treaty with Johor. The Dutch envoys departed from Melaka in early January 1713 with clear instructions from the Dutch governor to secure free access and free trade in Siak for both the VOC and citizens of Melaka. The Raja Muda was deeply irritated not only by the obduracy displayed by the Dutch envoys in pushing for the renegotiation of key terms in the treaty, but also by the evident reluctance (even sheer unwillingness) of the Dutch to observe Malay diplomatic etiquette. The Raja Muda complained about the

terse and deeply offensive language used in the Melaka governor’s letters and sought to cover up his own vacillating position in the negotiations by blaming, among other causes, the translator for not understanding him.<sup>11</sup>

The Raja Muda was also offended by the Dutch on a different front: they had begun to charge tolls on Johorese ships at Melaka – these had been expressly exempted from such tolls under Article 3 of the 1689 treaty - and the Dutch had also impounded a Johorese vessel off the Coromandel Coast of India. These actions were deeply offensive in the Malay cultural context as they indicated that the Dutch were impacting negatively on the raja’s *nama* or reputation, and *nama* was essential to Malay kingship and a key to merit in his after-life.<sup>12</sup> Dutch reports noted that the Johorese were preventing Javanese vessels from calling at Melaka and were instead re-routing them to trade in the port of Riau instead (present-day Tanjung Pinang

<sup>11</sup> Andaya, *The Kingdom of Johor*, 220-225.

<sup>12</sup> Andaya, *The Kingdom of Johor*, 226; concerning the quest for *nama* by the Malay rulers, see A.C. Milner, *Kerajaan*, 104-6, and Milner, *The Malays* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 66-7; also J.H. Walker, “Autonomy, Diversity, and Dissent: Conceptions of Power and Sources of Action in the Sejarah Melayu (Raffles MS 18)”, *Theory and Society*, 33.2 (2004), 213.



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on the island of Bintan).<sup>13</sup>

This, combined with the stated unwillingness to negotiate with such junior Dutch officials, prompted the Raja Muda to open direct negotiations with Batavia. An embassy led by the Johor *Laksamana*, Seri Nara di Raja, arrived in Batavia on 26 April 1713. The following letter from Abdul Jalil IV addressed to Governor-General Abraham van Riebeeck (1709-1713) was presented. In this the Sultan professed his deep respect and affection for the VOC and by invoking it reminded Van Riebeeck of their long-standing mutual relationship which stretched back to the early seventeenth century. The Sultan also used the opportunity to reiterate his interpretation of Article 3 of the 1689 VOC-Johor Treaty, explaining that the right of access and free trade granted to the Dutch in Siak had been strictly limited to the Company and did not extend to either the free burghers or the residents of Melaka. Then came the question of the vessel intercepted off the Coromandel Coast of India. The Dutch promised to return the vessel and the confiscated cargo.<sup>14</sup>

The Sultan was executing a delicate balancing act and he was not unaware of his difficult negotiating position. Apart from being a polite ges-

ture, his invocation of enduring friendship with the VOC contrasts sharply with earlier threats by the Raja Muda about possibly seeking to make a new treaty with the French – one of the enemies of the Dutch Republic during the War of Spanish Succession (1701-1714). Since the beginning of the eighteenth century the French had been consolidating their interests in the region around the Bay of Bengal, including especially Tenasserim and Kedah. Foreign trade in Riau, it would appear, was not exactly flourishing at the time and might have been affected negatively by the European war. Certainly the Sultan would also have realized that it was not wise to alienate the Dutch in the face of a possible Siamese attack on Johor. Just how tenuous his negotiating position must have been transpires from his request for Dutch permission to send more shiploads of rice to Johor. The report of Governor-General Van Riebeeck to the Board of Directors of the VOC dated 13 January 1713, reports that between twenty and thirty Javanese vessels had already brought cargoes of rice and salt to ports in Johor, including Bengkalis and Lingga.<sup>15</sup> The request for supplementary cargoes, however, was turned down by the VOC on the grounds that famine was affecting the whole region.

<sup>13</sup> W.Ph. Coolhaas, ed., *Generale Missiven van Gouverneurs-Generaal en Raden aan Heren XVII der Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie*, dl. VI (1698-1713) (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976), 901, report of Van Riebeeck to the Heren XVII, 13 January 1713.

<sup>14</sup> Andaya, *The Kingdom of Johor*, 227.

<sup>15</sup> W.Ph. Coolhaas, ed., *Generale Missiven*, dl. VI (1698-1713), 902.



## 2 Transcription of the Dutch text

Peter Borschberg, “Letter from the King of Johor, Abdul Jalil Shah IV (r. 1699-1720), to Governor-General Abraham van Riebeeck, 26 April 1713”.

UIT: DAGHREGISTERS VAN BATAVIA, 26 APRIL 1713 [BEGINNEND BIJ FOL. 230.]

Translaat Malaytse missive door den Koning van Johoor aan Zyn Edelheyt den Heer Gouverneur Generael Abraham van Riebeeck en de Heeren Raden van Nederlands India geschreven.

Desen brief van zuyvre en opregte vrindschap mitsgaders volkomen, en altoos duurende genegentheyt komt vanwegens Jang Di Partoewan Besar Siri Sulthan Abdul Djalil Ra Ayat Sjah bezitter en heerscher van den koningstroom van Johoor en Pahang, en alle de verdre daeronder gehorende [fol. 231] landen, aen onsen goeden vrind den Heere Gouverneur Generael tot Batavia, mitsgaders aen alle de Raden van India dewelk etc.

Wijders maek ik bij desen aen den Heer Gouverneur Generael ende Raden van India bekend, alsdat ik voor tegenwoordig kome af te zenden den Orang Kaya Siri Maradi Radja en Orang Kaya Siri Bidji Wangsa, aen Radja Lila Poetra naar Batavia, omme den Heere Gouverneur Generael en de Raden van India te ontmoeten tot meer en meer aanbiedinge van d’onderlinge verbonden, en bontgenoodschap en tot bewijs van een hoogagting en vrindschap, mitsgaders om nader welstand van den Heer Gouverneur Generael te verneemen agtervolgens d’oude gewoontens opdat de bontgenoodschap geensints werde verandert of daeraen eenig misverstand of verschillentheyt toegebracht maer integendeel dat deselve steeds in zijn volle kragt bestendig en vereeuwigt blijft soo lange de son en maen haer schijnsels sullen komen te geeven, vermits de E. Compagnie en de Hollanders die boven of benedenswints zijn van overlange en al van oude tijden af mijne vrinden en die den gezamentlijke rijxgroten van Djohor geweest zijn en dat in een altoos wetersijdse vrindschap en hulpbewijsing in alle zaeken daer ’t behoerlijck en betamelijck is.

Voorts versoeck ik om de hulp en gunst van de Heer Gouverneur Generael en de Raden van India om met partije buskruyt en kogels te mogen gerieft werden, en indien den Gouverneur Generael en de Raden van India aen mij haere hulpe en goedertierne [fol. 232] gunst gelieve te bewijsen aengaende den handel van Siak die door de Compagnie ten tijde van Datok Padoeka Radja is begeert, soo is ’t dat ik tegenwoordig maer eenelijck instantig versoeke dat den Heer Gouverneur Generael ende Raden van India dat vooreerst nog wat gelieven in te zien.

De reedenen waerom ik dusdanig na waerheyt en opregtigheyt dese betuyging komen te doen, is ten aansien van omdat de Compagnie en de Hollanders die soo boven als benedenswints zijn, van alle oude tijden opregte vrinden van de Djohoresen zijn geweest en met deselve steeds in onderlinge vrindschap hebben geleefd sonder een



## TRANSCRIPTION OF THE DUTCH TEXT

eenig verschil aengaende de contracten en vrindschap te hebben gehad.

Aangaende de handelvaertuygen die met rijs van Java na Djohor ten handel willen komen, dierwegens heb ik gehoord dat deselve door de bedientens van de E. Compagnie die tot Java zijn daerin worden belet, welken wegen ik versoeck dat den Heer Gouverneur Generael en de Raden van India gelieven te voorzien, dat die volkeren daerin niet belet maer toegestaen mogen werden om met believen en vergunninge van d'E. Compagnie en den Heer Gouverneur Generael en de Raden van India alle jaren met rijst na Djohor te komen, vermits de Hollanders en de Johoresen als één volk [fol. 233] zijn, dewelke zig nooyt van malkanderen gesepareert ofte eenig verschil gehad, maer altoos getragt hebben den regten weg te bewandelen.

Ik make bij desen aen den Heer Gouverneur Generael en de Raden van India bekent dat nu twee à drie jaren geleden, wij een kleyn sloopje hebben afgehuurt om 'tselve naer Mahmoor Bendar, Madras, Trenkabara, Nagoor, en Nagapatnam ten handel te zenden, zijnde desselfs nachoda geweest, eenen Balappa Modliar dewelke de negotiegoederen zoo van mijn als die van Radja Moeda ontrent ten bedrage van 8000 rds. derwaerts gebragt heeft. Voorsz. sloopje hebben wij eerst na Malacca gezonden, en bij een brief van Radja Moeda aen den gouverneur tot Malacca laten versoecken, ingevalle 't geschiede mogte men naer voorsz. 5 plaetzen ten handel gaen mogte, zijn E.E. 'tselve sloopje geliefde te laten vertrecken dog soo neen alsdng maer tot Malacca soude aenhouden. Edog den Gouverneur van Malacca heeft voornoemde sloopje na de genoemde plaetzen vergunt te varen, zijnde tegenwoordig gemelte Balacca Modliar weder op Djohoor gekomen en de geheele lading soo van mijn als [fol. 234] die van Radja Moeda is door den Gouverneur tot Nagapatnam geconfisqueert geworden, welkentwegen ik en alle de raadspersonen ten hoogsten verwondert zijn aengesien zulx geheel strijdig is, en aenloopt tegens den naem van bontgenoten. Indien den Heer Gouverneur Generael en de Raden van India haer hulp en gunste 't mijwaerts gelieve te betoonen soo versoeck ik dat soo 't mogelijk is, dat alle die goederen wederom mogen gegeven werden, hebbende Radja Moeda bij een brief datzelve mede aen den Gouverneur van Malacca versogt, edog zijn E.E. daerop g'antwoort dat wij dat versoeck ontrent den Gouverneur Generael en de Raden van India doen zoude. Wanneer den Orang Kaya Siri Mara Diradja den Orang Kaya Siri Biedji Wangsa en Radja Lila Poetra hare zaken behoort tot Batavia verrigt hebben, zoo versoeck ik dat dezelve ten eersten wederom na Djohor gezonden mogen werden, opdat ik ten spoedigste goede tijding mag bekomen.

Tot een teken van suyvre en opregte vrindschap zende ik hiernevens aen den Hr. Gouverneur Generael en de Raden van India 't volgende als:

- 3 ps. zijde rollen gebloemde,
- 2 ps. zijde rollen met goud,
- 1 ps. zijde rollen roode,
- 1 ps. zijde groene,
- 2 ps zijde blauwe en,
- 1 ps. zijde purper, 'tgunt ik versoeke [met] genegentheyt te willen accepteren.



### 3 English translation

Peter Borschberg, “Letter from the King of Johor, Abdul Jalil Shah IV (r. 1699-1720), to Governor-General Abraham van Riebeeck, 26 April 1713”.

FROM : DAILY JOURNALS OF BATAVIA CASTLE, 26 APRIL 1713 [BEGINNING WITH FOL. 230.]

Translation of a letter in Malay written by the King of Johor to His Excellency the Lord Governor-General Abraham van Riebeeck and the Gentlemen Councillors of Asia.

This letter of pure and unsullied friendship as well as of absolute and enduring amity is from Yang Di Pertuan Besar Sri Sultan Abdul Jalil Ra’yat Shah, possessor and ruler of the royal throne of Johor and Pahang, and all the other realms and territories pertaining [231] to these to one of our good friends the Lord Governor-General in Batavia and to the Councillors of Asia who etc. etc.

Moreover, I take this opportunity to announce to the Lord Governor-General and Councillors of Asia that at the present moment I have dispatched *Orang Kaya* Sri Maradi Raja and *Orang Kaya* Sri Biji Wangsa, and Raja Lila Putra to Batavia to meet the Lord Governor-General and the Councillors of Asia to add yet more expressions of reciprocal ties and alliance and as a token of respect and friendship, besides learning more about the wellbeing of the Lord Governor-General according to ancient custom, as the alliance has not not altered in one single point nor has it been injured by any misunderstanding or dispute. In fact, the contrary is true and in its full force it will continue steadfast and enduring as long as the Sun and the Moon shall continue to shed their light because the Honourable Company and the Hollanders both above and below the winds have ever been, since days of yore, my friends and [the friends] of those of those who have held high office in Johor and in all matters, as is right and proper, there has always been mutual friendship and assistance.

Furthermore, I request the help and benevolence of the Lord Governor-General and the Councillors of Asia in helping me to [acquire] a consignment of gunpowder and bullets and, should the Governor-General and the Councillors of Asia in their kindness see fit to bestow on me their help and benefaction [fol. 232] in the matter of the Siak trade which was so desired by the Company in the time of Datuk Paduka Raja, I hereby submit the one single request that the Governor-General and the Councillors of Asia will accord the examination of this their priority.

The reason I seek after the truth and veracity of this declaration is because the Company and the Hollanders both above and below the winds have been the sincere friends of the Johorese since days of yore and still live together in mutual amity, unmarred by any dispute about either the contracts or the friendship.

With reference to the trading vessels which want to come to Johor with rice from Java, I have heard that this has been forbidden by the servants of the Honourable Com-





## ENGLISH TRANSLATION

pany in Java, and I request the Lord Governor-General and the Councillors of Asia reconsider [this matter], so that these people might not be hindered but helped to sail to Johor every year at the discretion and with the permission of the Lord Governor-General and Councillors of Asia, as the Hollanders and the people of Johor are as one people [233], who are never disengaged from each other and are constantly devoted to one another, nor have [they ever] been torn asunder by differences, but have always tried to walk the path of righteousness.

In this [letter], I announce to the Lord Governor-General and the Councillors of Asia that two or three years ago we chartered a small vessel to send to trade in Porto Nuovo (Makmud Bendar, Parangipettai), Madras, Tranquebar (Tharangambadi), Nagore and Nagapatnam. Her captain (*nachoda*) was a certain Balappa Modliar, who carried trading commodities belonging to me as well as to the Raja Muda worth 8,000 rix-dollars. We ordered the aforesaid skipper to sail first to Melaka and in a letter from the Raja Muda addressed to the Governor of Melaka we asked that, should this [venture] prosper, whether one might go to the five above-mentioned places to trade [and that] His Excellency give said ship leave to sail, [and] if not to detain her in Melaka. In the event, the Governor of Melaka did give the aforesaid small vessel permission to sail to the above-mentioned places, and now Balacca/Balappa Modliar has returned to Johor and the whole cargo, both that belonging to me and [234] [that of] the Raja Muda, was confiscated by the Governor of Nagapatnam, which action astounded both myself and all my councillors in view of the fact it is completely inconsistent with and is contrary to our alliance.

Should the Lord Governor-General and the Councillors of Asia wish to bestow their assistance and benevolence on me, I do request you that it be [made] possible for all the goods to be returned, a request that the Raja Muda has already submitted in a letter to the Governor of Melaka, to which His Excellency replied that we should submit this request to the Governor-General and the Councillors of Asia. When *Orang Kaya* Sri Mara Diraja, *Orang Kaya* Sri Biji Wangsa and Raja Lila Putra duly address their business to Batavia, my first request is that they may be sent back to Johor, so that I may receive good tidings as soon as possible.

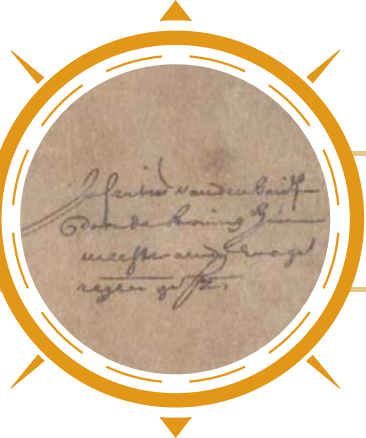
As a token of my unsullied and sincere friendship I send the Lord Governor-General and the Councillors of Asia the following:

- 3 bolts of floral silk
- 2 bolts of silk brocade
- 1 bolt of red silk
- 1 bolt of green silk
- 2 bolts of blue silk and
- 1 bolt of purple silk, I entreat you to accept these with pleasure.



## 4 Colophon

<b>Title</b>	Peter Borschberg, “Letter from the King of Johor, Abdul Jalil Shah IV (r. 1699-1720), to Governor-General Abraham van Riebeeck, 26 April 1713”. In: <i>Harta Karun. Hidden Treasures on Indonesian and Asian-European History from the VOC Archives in Jakarta</i> , document 7. Jakarta: Arsip Nasional Republik Indonesia, 2013.
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### 5 Folio image

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