

Revisiting 'lazy native' myth

Dato' Dzul kifli Abd Razak

Article

[The New Sunday Times - 07/29/2007](#)

IN the issue of Forbes (July 2), there was a ranking of 100 celebrities based on popularity and earnings. As expected, it was dominated by showbiz artistes and authors. None were from the academe.

If a similar list was attempted in Malaysia, the ranking may be quite identical, with nobody from the academe.

This is nothing to gripe about, knowing that people in showbiz are anytime more popular and richer.

That is just how things are. More often, intellectual personalities are in the "backroom", preoccupied with their thoughts and ideas. The image of the absent-minded professor is all pervasive — they are hardly celebrity material.

But some of them are towering personalities, to whom the public owe so much, unknowingly, most of the time. In their own quiet way, their ideas influence and shape the thinking of society. We only begin to realise their greatness once they are gone.

The death of Professor Datuk Syed Hussein Alatas, a founder and former leader of Gerakan, led the party's secretary-general Datuk Chia Kwang Chye to state: "I regret not being able to interview him for a book on Gerakan."



[USM is revisiting Professor Datuk Syed Hussein Alatas' classic work](#)

The professor passed away on Jan 23. He was a much respected intellectual giant, someone the younger and future generations must remember for his contributions.

His legacy must continue to fill the intellectual space with ideas so fresh that it will perennially inspire us to contribute and (re)construct new understanding about the society we live in.

Otherwise, as feared by some, Syed Hussein's demise would mark an end of intellectual culture and scholarly tradition, with particular reference to the Malay world, and Malaysian politics in general.

But that does not mean that the Malays must "internalise" stereotyped ideas about their backwardness in the likes of Revolusi Mental, a book that Syed Hussein readily criticised. Another was the Malay Dilemma.

It was exactly three decades ago, that his book, *The Myth of the Lazy Native*, first met the public. It has caused a stir since then.

Universiti Sains Malaysia is revisiting his classic work through a seminar entitled "The myth of the lazy native revisited".

Just like the subtitle of his book (*A Study of the Image of the Malays, Filipinos, and Javanese from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century and Its Function in the Ideology of Colonial Capitalism*), the seminar will hear the views of "natives" from Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia.

The panellists will articulate "the myth" as suggested by Syed Hussein.

Today, with barely a month to go for the 50th anniversary of Merdeka, it is time that this myth is revisited with the purpose of shattering it once and for all, as Syed Hussein would have wanted it.

This would truly be a remarkable turning point for the nation whose natives have been burdened with so much fabricated biases and stereotypes. Perhaps, this time, we will be more successful as a nation in unloading some of the historical baggage of the colonial past.

This will allow us to have a clearer 2020 vision in the drive towards a truly developed Malaysia, as envisaged by the national blueprint, Wawasan 2020 — devoid of the "bebalism" of yesteryears.

Not surprisingly, his work has truly put Syed Hussein, as an intellectual visionary, well ahead of his time, within the Malaysian context.

He could easily be put at par with luminaries of his time. This makes him a Malaysian icon to be remembered as the foremost scholar to deconstruct Western ideologies and expose contradictions in colonial strategies that continue to impact the policies of postcolonial administration.

Farish A. Noor, a student of Syed Hussein, when paying tribute, ably crystallised some major points that put his mentor in a class of his own.

They included identity politics. The construction of racial categories and racial stereotypes was never accidental but processes fundamentally wedded to the working of (racialised) power.

Secondly, the colonial enterprise required a moral pretext that was granted by the construction of convenient "instrumental fiction" (to borrow Edward Said's phrase) that helped to justify such an enterprise.

Thirdly, the perpetuation and reproduction of such categories of identity and differences ran parallel to the workings of racialised colonial capitalism. The two sustained each other, helping to create the highly divisive and uneven "plural economies" so common in many colonial settings.

Fourthly, the legacy of colonial capitalism, having embedded itself in the racialised politics of difference and sectarianism in many colonies, would be hard to eradicate even after the departure of the colonial power.

This is because local native elites themselves would have, by then, come to learn that the very same tools of divide-and-rule could be used by them to perpetuate such power differentials in the future.

In short, Syed Hussein has impressively uncovered how venomous racial views have influenced (Malay) indigenous perceptions, even long after the last colonialist left.

Join us tomorrow at the one-day "Seminar on the myth of the lazy native revisited" at Universiti Sains Malaysia's Cultural Hall (Dewan Budaya) to learn more.

[Terms & Conditions](#)