# The Malaysian Intellectual:
# A Brief Historical Overview of the Discourse

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ABSTRAK

*Kertas ini memperkatakan wacana yang melibatkan intelektual di Malaysia. Ia menegaskan bahawa sesuai dengan perubahan sosio-politik, 'bidang makna' yang berkaitan konsep 'intelektual' dan lokasi sosial sebenar para intelektual itu sudah mengalami perubahan besar sepanjang abad dua puluh. Ini menimbulkan cabaran kepada sejarahwan yang ingin melihat masa lampau dengan kaca mata masa kini tetapi yang sepatutnya perlu difahami dengan tanggapan yang ikhlas sesuai dengan masanya. Selain itu, ia juga menimbulkan cabaran kepada penyelidik sains sosial untuk mengelak dari mengaitkan konsep masa lampau kepada konsep masa terkini supaya dapat memahami sumbangan ide dan kaitannya kepada masa lampau. Sehubungan itu, makalah ini memberi bayangan sekilas tentang persekitaran, motivasi dan sumbangan beberapa tokoh intelektual yang terkenal di Malaysia.*

*Kata kunci: A Samad Ismail, intelektual, wacana, Alam Melayu*

ABSTRACT

*This paper focuses on the discourse in Malaysia concerning intellectuals. It asserts that in concert with political and sociological changes, the 'field of meanings' associated with the concept of 'the intellectual' and the actual social location of intellectual actors have undergone considerable change during the twentieth century. This flags the challenge for historians who are telling today's stories about the past in today's terms, but who have to try to understand that past on its own terms. Further, it flags the challenge for social scientists to not merely appropriate the concepts of past scholars in tying to understand the present, but rather to also understand the context in which those ideas had relevance. Along the way, this paper gives glimpses of the circumstances, motivations and contributions of a number of leading Malaysian intellectual figures.*

*Key words: A Samad Ismail, intellectuals, discourse, Malay World*

## INTRODUCTION

With the passing of Tan Sri Abdul Samad Ismail on 4 September 2008, the various tributes accorded him in the mainstream media and on Internet blogs referred to him as a 'veteran journalist'[1], a 'prolific writer'[2], an 'anti-colonial fighter'[3], a 'political activist'[4], a 'social historian and raconteur'[5] and so on. Largely missing from the list of descriptive terms was that of 'intellectual' – though perhaps there is oblique reference to this in the title of Balan Moses' piece in the *New Straits Times: Obituary – Tan Sri A. Samad Ismail* (1924-2008): *the Thinking Man's Editor*. This 'absence' is despite prominent media references to A. Samad Ismail in the 1950s as a young 'Malay intellectual'.[6] Certainly the historical memory fades and is rewritten; and, Pak Samad (as he is popularly known) has been a rather controversial figure in Malaysian public life, but this 'absence' also highlights the dynamics and perplexities of (and political sensitivities associated with) discourse concerning the intellectual.

While discourse concerning intellectuals has been of interest in historical, philosophical and sociological studies, much of this literature has focused on the European and North American contexts. Even in contrast to neighbouring Indonesia and the Philippines where public intellectuals have been given some prominence, such discourse in 20th century Malaya and Malaysia[7] has been rather more muted. The reasons for this are multiple and complex.

The discourse concerning the intellectual is a constantly reworked conceptual space in which intellectual actors and others can redefine intellectuals' roles, agendas, identities, social relations, and even the discourse's language, conceptual tools and rules of engagement. Thus, rather than begin with a predetermined definition of the 'intellectual' and seek to identify people who fit that definition, the approach suggested is to examine what people, in this case Malaysians, and their texts say at particular points in time regarding 'who their intellectuals are' and, thus, ask 'what do Malaysians mean by the term?' It will be seen that the 'field of meanings' associated with the signifier 'the intellectual' and the actual social location of intellectual actors have undergone considerable change in 20th century Malaya/Malaysia, in accordance with local political and sociological changes, but in many ways paralleling developments elsewhere. This study reminds us that social construction is ongoing; and, that much 'work' goes into constructing not only gender (which has been much analysed), but also social roles such as intellectual, politician, teacher, student, engineer, lawyer, doctor, patient, father/mother, child, etc (many of the latter roles having been much less explored). Not only is it part of the task of social scientists and historians to explore such dynamics, but they must also seek to understand the social and historical contexts of the terms, concepts and ideas, which they use, and not to assume that one's present understandings are, and always have been, universally applicable. After briefly examining the historical roots of the general discourse, this paper will then overview specific features of the discourse concerning intellectuals in 20th century Malaya/Malaysia.

## ORIGINS OF THE DISCOURSE

In the English language, the term 'intellectual' in its noun form has at least since the 17th century referred to 'a person possessing, or supposed to possess, superior powers of intellect' (*Oxford English Dictionary* 1933). As a modern sociological concept, the term can be traced back to the trial in 1898 in France of Captain Alfred Dreyfus, who had been framed and charged with treason (Burns 1999). It was at this time that the term took on an ambivalent and political edge, as indicated by the frequent subsequent use of the denigrating sobriquet, the 'so-called' intellectuals. Critics saw the supporters of Captain Dreyfus as literary people getting involved in political affairs for which they were seen as ill equipped. A related term–the collective category 'the intelligentsia' can be traced to mid 1800s Russia and Poland. In Russia, it referred to an alienated stratum drawn from the rural landed gentry class, orientated towards European (largely French and German) culture and science, and critical of both the state and society. In Poland, their general ethos was generally one of seeking cultural preservation.

Since that time, 'intellectuals' in the English-language (mainly sociological) literature have been variously described as: literate and educated (sometimes religious) elites; as creators of high culture, philosophers, scientific innovators and 'men of ideas' (Coser 1965); as treasonous clerics who should be upholding eternal standards of truth and justice (Benda 1928 & 1969); as either traditional intellectuals (teachers, priests and administrators) who continue to do the same thing from generation to generation or as organic intellectuals arising from and providing leadership for their class (Gramsci 1971); as independent thinkers and truth seekers; as people either providing order and continuity in public life or as disputing and subverting prevailing norms (Shils 1958-9); as left-inclined radicals; as marginalised, creative outspoken individuals whose *raison d'être* is to represent all those peoples and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug. (Said 1994); and, with increasing degrees of abstraction, as 'a situated social practice' (Eyerman 1994); and, as actors in inter and intra-generational intellectual networks and rivalries involved in particular kinds of interaction rituals (Collins 1998). In Malaysia, perhaps the best-known commentary is that by Syed Hussein Alatas, who observed the absence of a 'functional intellectual group' due to a prevailing mental colonisation (published in 1977, first discussed in 1950s).

## DISCOURSE CONCERNING INTELLECTUALS IN 20TH CENTURY MALAYA/MALAYSIA AND THE MALAY WORLD

The trajectory of discourse concerning intellectuals in 20th century Malaya/Malaysia has many elements in common with that in other nations, in keeping

with general worldwide social trends. Before the 'modern era', the *ulama* (religious teachers) and royal elites served as the guardians and transmitters of knowledge and custom. Early 20<sup>th</sup> century intellectual actors were educated and literate individuals in a society where literacy was not yet widespread. They were very often connected to traditional ruling or religious elites by kinship or educational ties. With the advent of 'print capitalism' as described by Ben Anderson (1983 & 1991), editors and journalists – A. Samad Ismail being prominent among them in Singapore and later in Malaysia – played a key role in analysing and influencing the issues of the day and shaping the thinking of the newspaper readership. University students, by virtue of their superior ability and educational achievement relative to their society, were also at one time regarded as 'intellectuals'. Increasingly, the bar was raised and it became necessary to have a degree or higher degree, a recognised publishing record and intellectual output as well as a prominent public persona. With the democratisation of education, the advent of mass literacy and greater bureaucratisation, the heirs to the intellectual tradition now work in large institutions (universities, think tanks, even government and government religious institutions), where careers are the priority and new or challenging ideas are not always well received. Mona Abaza, when comparing the intellectual scenes in Malaysia and Egypt, concluded somewhat critically that the Malaysian scene was 'dominated by managers, bureaucrats and technocrats … willingly co-opted and participating in the ideology of … the state' (2002). Despite such comment, it is evident that there has been a rich discourse on 'being an intellectual' in Malaya/Malaysia and in the wider Malay world, of which the following are some highlights:

In the Malay-speaking world, the term was first used in the 'modern' (French) sense in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Netherlands East Indies (NEI) in the Dutch form *intellectuelen* and it various derivatives. It filtered quickly into the Indonesian language as *kaum intelek*, *proletar intelek*, etc. Language commissions set up during and after the Japanese occupation period (1942-45) coined the word '*cendekiawan*' from a Sanskrit/Hindustani/Minangkabau root meaning 'clever' or 'tricky' (Winstedt 1965). At least since the 1920s in the NEI and later in Indonesia, there has been a lively intellectual scene and discourse on 'being an intellectual'.

In 1920-30s Malaya, elites from the various (Chinese, Peranakan, Indian, Malay, etc.) communities were also actively engaged in intellectual pursuits such as education, writing and publishing. There was a growing awareness of a collective identity as an elite group with particular social responsibilities, as indicated by the reference to 1930s Malay teachers as being the *kaum terpelajar* (educated group or elite). The term *intelektual* or *kaum intelek* does not appear in Malaya until after World War II. An early reference appeared in 1950s Singapore. American author, James A. Michener, had interviewed *Utusan Melayu* (serving) editor, A. Samad Ismail, just days prior to Samad's arrest and

detention by the British. Michener recorded his impressions of Samad under the heading 'The New Intellectual' (1952). A. Samad Ismail's colleagues at *Utusan Melayu* began using the term in Malay, for example Usman Awang wrote that the 'people really need intellectuals who have the spirit of the people *(kaum intelektual yang berjiwa rakyat)*, not intellectuals who have the spirit of the aristocrats' (*Mastika* 6, 1953:4). This nascent elite rising to challenge the intellectual authority of the *ancien régime* (royal and religious elites) comprised mainly teachers, journalists and literary writers. (Note that, unlike A. Samad Ismail, not all were at that time labelled specifically as 'intellectuals', though retrospectively they may have come to be regarded so. Further note that religious teachers were accorded ascriptives such as *ustaz*, *tok guru*, *ulama*, rather than being described as 'intellectuals', although many earlier figures have also been retrospectively described as 'intellectuals'.)

Intellectual elites in the Malay world (coming from various educational and linguistic streams and including the Dutch-educated in the NEI; those educated at al-Azhar University in Cairo and in Mecca; those educated in a local *pondok* or *madrassah* (religious school), the English-educated; Malay-educated; Chinese-educated, etc.) were at forefront of nationalist movements – fostering loyalty to '*bangsa*' (race/nation), *agama* (religion) *dan negara* (country)' (in the 1920s and 30s this was expressed as a loyalty to *kaum* (people/family/group), *bangsa* (race) and *watan* or *tanah air* (homeland)). Their identity was forming as an elite distinct from not only colonial elites, but also from traditional political and religious elites–through ideological identification with the '*rakyat*' (people/masses) from whence most had arisen**.** They tended to be left-of-centre in their politics and were involved at the forefront of the newspaper and publishing industries. They included people such as Ahmad Boestamam, Usman Awang, Keris Mas, Burhanuddin Al-Helmy, Ishak Haji Mohamad, Ibrahim Yaacob, A. Rahim Kajai and A. Samad Ismail. Those from the traditional elites for example Datuk Onn Jaafar who was an outspoken writer and newspaper editor in the early 1930s, were to later assume political prominence thus resulting in Malayan politics taking a more conservative direction.

However, some were to join oppositional politics, with a few even taking up arms on the side of the Malayan Communist Party during the 'Emergency Period' (officially 1948-1960). Such were the temper of the times in which young A. Samad Ismail reached his prime. Indonesia was in the process of gaining its independence through armed revolution – with the clandestine support of some in Malaya who envisaged a *Melayu Raya* (combining what is today Indonesia and Malaysia). Such times not only shaped A. Samad Ismail[8], but left what was to be an indelible mark that some have made much of and have utilised for their own political ends.[9] It is noted that because of the involvement of prominent intellectual figures in its early formation, Malay nationalism came to have a strong linguistic and literary component – which was later harnessed to the cause of nation building.

University Students (as the new educated elites) played a prominent role in generating aspirations for independence and in challenging incumbent governments and the *status quo* in Malaysia in the late 1960s and early 1970s. They have continued to have political importance in Indonesia, but not so much in Malaysia, particularly after the implementation of the Universities and University Colleges (Amendment) Act (UUCA) 1975, which prohibited students from political involvement. It is significant that most of those who have been regarded as 'intellectuals' began their careers often in their teens or twenties, including people such as Mohammad Hatta, Sutan Sjahrir, Tun Abdul Razak, Lee Kuan Yew, Aminuddin Baki, David Tan Chee Khoon, Wang Gung Wu, James Puthucheary, Anwar Ibrahim, Hishamuddin Rais, and Sanusi Osman. Surprisingly, there have been relatively few 'late bloomers'. Among students who went on to have prominence as intellectuals in academe were Syed Hussein Alatas, Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, Ungku Aziz, Syed Husin Ali, Ungku Omar, Ishak Shaari, Abdul Rahman Embong, Jomo K.S., Rustam A. Sani, Chandra Muzaffar and Shamsul A.B.

Despite the very evident public role of early women teachers and journalists, both in the NEI and Malaya, and the subsequent active involvement of women in academia, NGOs and public life in general, very rarely have women been included as part of the discourse concerning intellectuals. The reasons for this are various, including structural factors (socialisation and social control, lesser access to education[10] and the public realm, early marriage, etc.); female leaders' discursive location most often as representing women's rather than general causes; and an intellectual discourse premised upon masculinised 'knowledge' and 'reason' rather than its absence embodied as feminised 'emotion', 'intuition' and 'irrationality', etc. Prominent 'intellectual' women figures in Malaysia have included Ibu Zain; Azah Aziz; Zaharah Nawawi; Zaharah Za'ba; Adibah Amin; Aishah Ghani; Asmah Haji Omar; Nik Safiah Karim; Siti Hawa Haji Salleh, Mavis Puthucheary; Rafidah Aziz; Noraini Othman and Zainah Anwar**.** While early figures often had connection with traditional (political or religious) elites, which accorded them a good education and some measure of freedom from domestic duties, increasingly they came from the masses (and particularly the middle classes). A. Samad Ismail's first wife, Hamidah Hassan, was an early woman journalist, novelist and political activist. Two of their daughters have been prominent journalists and bloggers.

For intellectuals, who had previously stood radically opposed to colonial rule, relations with authority were particularly problematic once independence was achieved. How can one be loyal to authority AND speak truth to power? This was the challenge faced by those employed in institutions such as the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (National Language and Literary Agency) as was exemplified in the 'Jebat Phenomenon' – a sustained and constantly reworked discourse in the fields of literary and drama production drawing on stories of Hang Tuah, Hang Jebat (and later Hang Nadim and Puteri Gunung Ledang)

from the *Malay Annals* and the *Hikayat Hang Tuah*. Hang Jebat began to replace the legendary hero, Hang Tuah, was a more appropriate 'thinking' hero for the present. Representative of those working at the DBP and those (including tertiary students) involved in this discourse were Syed Nasir Ismail, Keris Mas, Usman Awang, Kassim Ahmad, Johan Jaaffar, Dinsman (Shamsuddin Osman), and Hatta Azad Khan. However, the necessity of balancing the intellectual's obligations to speak truth fostering the interests of the general public and of the nation (often interpreted by those in power as serving the interests of the ruling coalition and elite) make for a perilous existence in the public arena - one that must necessarily be skillfully negotiated.

Intellectual elites were never a single entity or 'functioning group', as propounded by Alatas (1977). They were riven by differences arising from their various educational backgrounds, social locations and ideological positions. Nonetheless, clear generational and ideational/relational networks and links are apparent, as exemplified by the familial links between Onn Jaffar and his nephews Ungku Aziz, Syed Hussein Alatas, Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas and the teacher-student links between Syed Hussein Alatas, and Chandra Muzaffar; the familial links between Ahmad Boestaman and his son Rustam A. Sani; Munshi Sulaiman and his daughter Ibu Zain and her daughter Adibah Amin; Za'ba and his daughter Zaharah; K. Das and his daughter Jo Kukathas, etc. A. Samad Ismail's father, Haji Ismail bin Shairazi**,** was a leader of the Singaporean Javanese and Muslim communities – a head teacher at a Malay school, a writer contributing articles to local newspapers and a pioneer of the Kesatuan Melayu Singapore (KMS or Singapore Malay Union). Samad was tutored under leading editor and writer, Abdul Rahim Kajai and passed on his own interest and skills in political journalism to his daughters, Maria and Nuraina. This indicates the importance of family environment and connections in intellectual formation. If children (or students) are part of an environment in which they are encouraged to read, think critically and express their views – an environment in which public involvement is modelled to them by their elders (or mentors) – then it is much easier for them to enter into the networks and activities in which their elders (or mentors) already play a part.

Malaysian intellectuals do not always stand outside of political and bureaucratic power. Mahathir Mohamad and Anwar Ibrahim, for example, have been prominent intellectual figures with enviable publishing records. The linkages between political and intellectual endeavour has had both positive and negative effects. This has included a technocratisation of the government and the bureaucracy with the political leadership asserting that the most intellectually-able should rule and be allowed to continue to rule in a 'sustainable democracy' particularly during Mahathir's term in office. Leaders, the argument goes, have been voted in at the ballot box should thereafter be left to rule with as little interference as possible from the electorate. Furthermore, there has been a politicisation of 'high literary endeavour' and 'knowledge' with emphasis on

what is 'useful' (to the state). The state has attempted to foster and guide a national Islamisation project, resulting in the politicisation of Islam and the Islamisation of politics (a product of which is the *Islam Hadhari* (Civilisational Islam) project). Think tanks give support to political leaders in the generation of vision and policy, speeches, etc., but tend to be reliant on the continuing funding and support of their political patrons. Those significant in politics (amongst many others) have included Abdullah Majid, Abdullah Ahmad, Nordin Selat, M. Noor Azam, Musa Hitam, Rafidah Aziz, Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie, Syed Husin Ali, Lim Kit Siang, David Tan Chee Khoon, etc.; and those in think tanks: Nordin Sopiee, Abdul Razak Baginda, Kamarudin Jaafar, Mohamed Ariff Abdul Kareem, Zainal Aznam Yusof, etc. Politics and intellectual engagement, however, have been uneasy bedfellows due to both a convergence and conflict of interests.

## NGOS AND CIVIL SOCIETY

In the main in Malaysia, NGOs have been a middle class activity often, but not always, in cooperation with the government. NGOs became significant especially in the 1980s, providing a new arena for public activism for tertiary educated graduates for whom student activism or political involvement (because of their employment in the public service) was no longer an option. Whilst public activism does not automatically ensure that you will be acknowledged as 'an intellectual', a number of public intellectuals have been prominent in the NGO arena including Chandra Muzaffar and Anwar Ibrahim. Others prominent in NGO organisations (located predominantly in Penang and KL) include: Martin Khor Kok Peng, S.M. Mohamed Idris, Gurmit Singh K.S., Irene Fernandez, Rokiah Talib, the Sisters in Islam, Maznah Mohamed, Ivy Josiah, Jamilah Arrifin and Rohana Arrifin. NGO activities have been oriented around consumer, women's, environmental, Islamic and international justice concerns. Government control of civil society by means of punitive legislation and controls over access to funding and the media have served to restrict and circumscribe NGO space for intellectual activism and criticism.

The arts provide an arena where a diverse range of media can be creatively used to speak either directly or with subtlety to an audience. Those prominent have included Jins Shamsudin, A. Latiff Mohidin; Redza Piyadasa; Lat; Sofiyan Yahaya; Zulkifli Anwar (Zunar); M. Desa; Siti Zainon Ismail; Wong Hoy Cheong; Hishamuddin Rais; U-Wei Shaari; and, Shuhaimi Baba. There have been those who because of a mixed race heritage or because of their greater fluency in English as opposed to the national language, Malay, have been situated somewhat on the margins (or at the confluence) of Malaysian society. They have used this 'other (English language) space' as the site and medium for their intellectual expression, for example K.S. Maniam, Karim Raslan and Jo Kukathas.

Interestingly, the mainstream media has often been able to be used by people to speak critically, even if by more indirect means such as allegory and allusion. Amir Muhammad and his late 1990s literary column in the *New Straits Times* is a prominent example. Then there are those recalcitrant individuals–the round pegs in square holes–who have been committed to saying it as it is. For them, being an intellectual is perhaps more about being a particular personality than about performing a particular role–for example, Salleh Ben Joned who, like his (Indonesian) mentor Chairil Anwar, seemed simply unable to conform.

## THE INTERNET, BLOGGERS AND CYBER-ACTIVISM

That non-conformist aura has been continued by those who have since the mid-1990s utilised the Internet as an alternative arena for critical comment and communication. Circumventing restrictions on the mainstream media, individuals such as controversial journalist M.G.G. Pillai and webmaster Raja Petra Kamarudin, opposition political leaders such as Lim Kit Siang of the Democratic Action Party and political parties such as Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) have been able get their messages across to a younger and increasingly diverse IT-literate Malaysian society. With the advent of the blog (web log) from 1998 onwards, the Internet has become a powerful tool of personal, political and intellectual communication. Prime Minister Ahmad Abdullah Badawi acknowledged after the decline of the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition's fortunes in the March 2008 general elections, that government elites had underestimated the power of the Internet. Indeed, it has since been 'mainstreamed' with politicians expected to have personal web pages and blogs and the government-controlled mainstream media also setting up its own blogs. Former Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, who during his term in office justified government controls over the media, is now himself a prominent blogger and political commentator.

Nonetheless, attempts have been made to curb the Internet's influence. Government authorities have periodically investigated he web-based news site, *Malaysiakini*, and limited journalist access to government sources. In January 2007, a suit was brought against two prominent bloggers, Jeff Ooi and Ahiruddin Attan by The New Straits Times Press (Malaysia) Berhad, alleging defamation. Raja Petra Kamaruddin, the webmaster of the news portal *Malaysia Today*, was detained and charged with sedition as a result of comments posted in April 2008.

Despite its facility for instant communication, the Internet and especially blogs are not necessarily a forum for informed intellectual comment and debate. Rather, the medium can circumvent peer review, foster rumour and perpetuate unsubstantiated claims and generate an inordinate amount of material that is difficult to wade through let alone process. Its power in either facilitating or

reducing intellectual comment, in enabling participatory journalism, and in democratizing public space, nonetheless, give it potential to turn discourse concerning intellectuals in new directions.

## ITS MALAYSIAN CHARACTER

One aspect of past discourse concerning intellectuals in Malaysia has been its specifically 'Malaysian' character and sometimes 'anti-West' stance. Intellectual endeavour has been set within the frame of the Malaysian nation-state and has been harnessed towards the nation-building cause. The endeavours of even those whose priorities have been in the area of building up the *ummah* (Islamic community) have for the most part still been located largely within a 'Malaysian' frame. Thus, it is that we can talk about a Malaysian 'intellectual discourse', Malaysian Muslim intellectuals and Malaysia as a 'model' for the Islamic world. Academics and others have since the 1960s been engaged not only in the project of Malaysianisation, but also in fostering an epistemological revolution – to generate an indigenous (and/or Islamised) knowledge to replace 'colonial knowledge', which is said to have kept Malay/Malaysian minds captive and unable to realise an independence of thought. The intellectual contributions of early Muslim and Asian figures as well as classical Malay literature and Islamic sources have been studied and taught so as to provide a more 'authentic' basis for a local epistemology.

The realm of religion or Islam is seen as encompassing all of life and has been an important site of identity formation, of religious and intellectual debate, as well as a site of political contest. Comprising various and contesting streams of thought (traditionalist, modernist, reformist (Abdul Rahman Haji Abdullah 1998)), Islam has historically been a further means of resisting colonial and 'so-called' Western thought and influence. While in the past, prominent religious teachers were often connected (by family or teaching) to recognised religious figures of a previous generation, increasingly university-educated 'Muslim intellectuals' from state-run universities and religious institutions have risen to contest the authority of the traditionalist *ulama*. Prominent figures (not all of whom have been regarded at different times as representing 'true' Islam) have included: Hamzah Fansuri, Nuruddin ar-Raniri, Syed Sheikh al-Hadi, Burhanuddin al-Helmi, Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat, Abdul Hadi Awang, Haji Fadzil Mohd. Noor, Zulkifli Muhammad, Subky Latiff, Yusof Rawa, Mohd. Asri bin Haji Muda, Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, Anwar Ibrahim, Kassim Ahmad, Muhd. Uthman el-Muhammady, Ustaz Ashaari bin Muhammad, Chandra Muzaffar, and Farish A. Noor. Whilst Islam has always had strong intellectual elements, a consequence of recent sociological and educational developments has been a greater 'intellectualisation' of Islam (within a university context) and an institutionalisation of Islam under state guidance.

## A CHANGING SOCIAL CONTEXT AND A CHANGING 'FIELD OF MEANINGS'

It is difficult to rely on just one conceptualisation of the intellectual (as a class, group, or strata; as rebels, alienated amateurs, etc.) as each partially addresses the sociological question: 'What is an intellectual?' This research has taken a Foucaultian approach, viewing 'the intellectual' as an ongoing discourse and as a linguistic 'signifier' capable of being given multifarious definitions depending on the temporal and sociological location and the intent of the user. A consequence is that the term 'intellectual' to some extent becomes hollowed of real meaning and simply a term to be defined as the user wishes; but this also gives the theoretical possibility of being able to track, and explore the reasons for, changes in the 'field of meanings' associated with the term.

Intellectual discourse and praxis has been about the roles that intellectuals do play and should play, their social location *vis-à-vis* authority, the masses and 'their publics'; their spheres of activity and the media they used to communicate their ideas and views; their ideologies, political and intellectual standpoints, worldviews and beliefs; the norms and regulations which guide and circumscribe their activities. This window on Malaysian society reveals changing intellectual arenas (from school teachers and their publications; journalists and the mass media; student groups and academia; government institutions and think tanks; political parties and politics; NGOs; literary and artistic fields; to even cartooning and most recently the Internet) with individual actors who have been adept at using the different means each offers to engage a public audience. As government moves to regulate or 'own' a particular space, intellectuals move on and creatively explore or generate new spaces and arenas. Such spaces for expression of alternative views have to be constantly defended against the encroachment of 'authority' and 'conservatism' – both political and intellectual. Intellectuals, like politicians, continue to need a constituency to appeal to. However, there seems much less preoccupation today with the '*rakyat*' (masses) than was the case, for example in the 1950s. Individual (rather than societal) concerns seem to have assumed a greater priority, as exemplified in the Enfiniti Productions cinematic revision of the Malay classic, *Puteri Gunung Ledang* released in 2004. In this film version starring Tiara Jaquelina and M. Nasir, 'love between a man and a woman' seems to take precedence over the concerns and problems of a kingdom and its people – perhaps reflecting a preoccupation with the immediate and sensory; with mass entertainment; and, also indicating a social atomisation that is the consequence of modern urban living.

I have suggested that ideas (and the language which contains them) are fluid. To stand in the shoes and see through the eyes of someone in the past is a necessarily cross-cultural and rather difficult task, for first of all you have to attempt to understand the patterns of thoughts, concepts and language applicable

at that time. Yet, has there been real change over time in the discourse about 'being an intellectual'; or are we just observing differences in emphasis given to particular elements of the 'field of meanings' which is the concept 'the intellectual'? Perhaps one trend has been the greater level of abstraction in the discourse with the advent of a post-modern awareness of the 'constructed-ness' of the intellectual role, rather than just taking the term as a pre-defined given. Yet, intellectuals in particular have always been aware of the contingent and contested nature of their social identity. People do have a general understanding of what the term means, though they may ask to a more specific definition: 'What do you mean by the term and why do you regard this person as an "intellectual"?' In other words, there is a fixity–a 'field of meanings', which can be added to from time to time–and a fluidity–the variability in which meanings are selected and emphasised at a particular time and place for whatever reasons.

Why has this discourse been more muted in Malaysia with A. Samad Ismail not accorded clear recognition as a prominent Malaysian intellectual? The reasons have to do with Malaysia's particular historical trajectory under British colonialism wherein established elites continued in power before and after national independence; wherein leftist politics was tarred with a 'communist' brush and actively repudiated; wherein intellectual elites were coopted into the on-going nation building project. Intellectual elites are crucial to that project – as facilitators but also as those who can potentially challenge accepted wisdoms. Thus, there is a great deal of emphasis on the part of those in government on providing 'constructive criticism' through proper channels; on contributing ideas in the service of the society and nation. A. Samad Ismail's experience has been interwoven with these realities - detained twice under the British for alleged 'subversive' anti-colonial activities and once during the Prime Ministership of Hussein Onn because of his influence and proximity to the previous regime under Abdul Razak; prevented from moving to Malaysia from Singapore by Malaysia's first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman, yet masterminding the take-over and Malaysianisation of the New Straits Times Press, formerly in British expatriate hands and based in Singapore; serving the nationalist agenda of the powers that be while seeking to be his own man. Forced in 1981 to publicly confess on national television a past 'connection' to communism,[11] his public humiliation sent a clear message that no one in the public arena was removed from the reach of a determined Malaysian government.

While A. Samad Ismail had first-hand experience of the complexities and difficulties of engagement in the public arena, he was also subject to changing societal understandings of the intellectual and his/ her role. Whereas up until the mid-20th century journalists and editors were key intellectual figures involved in the nationalist cause, they are today generally not accorded the same recognition. They now work within a very different set of structural and professional parameters.  The discourse concerning intellectuals not only upholds

the ideal of allowing free expression of contrary views with the public good in mind, it also gives attention to how this ideal might be achieved in practice. From this perspective, A. Samad Ismail's life experience is instructive. Unfortunately, however, we must leave more detailed discussion of the backgrounds, personalities, motivations and contributions of Individual Malaysian intellectuals to some future time and place.

## NOTES

[1]   'Veteran journalist Samad Ismail critically ill'. *The Star.* 1 September 2008, <http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2008/9/1/nation/22216181&sec=nation>.

[2]   Lee Kuan Yew cited in 'Kuan Yew: Samad was prolific writer, shrewd man'. *Malaysiakini.* 8 September 2008, <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/89276>.

[3]   Darshan S Khaira. 'Samad Ismail's place in history'. *Malaysiakini.* 10 Sep 2008, <http://www.malaysiakini.com/letters/89424>.

[4]   Nor-Afidah Abd Rahman. National Library Board Singapore. 'A Towering Malaysian: Pak Samad Ismail'. 10 October 2008, <http://infopedia.nl.sg/articles/SIP_166_2005-01-20.html>.

[5]   Balan Moses. Obituary - Tan Sri A. Samad Ismail (1924-2008): The thinking man's editor. *New Straits Times.* 5 September 2008.

[6]   Refer to Michener (1952); Hooker (2000: 181, 432 footnote 1); Keris Mas (1979: 44, 48-9, 81); Hamidah Hassan in Cheah Boon Kheng (2000: 16).

[7]   The Federation of Malaya gained its independence from Britain in 1957. It became the Federation of Malaysia in 1963 with the addition of Sabah, Sarawak and Singapore, though Singapore left in 1965 to become a separate nation.

[8]   For accounts of a. Samad Ismail's formative years refer A Samad Ismail, 1993 and Cheah Boon Kheng (ed.) (2000).

[9]   Refer to: James R. Rush. The 1994 Ramon Magsaysay Award for Journalism, Literature and Creative Communication Arts - Biography of Abdul Samad Ismail.' 1994 (link on Din Merican's web blob, 'Pak Samad: a biographical sketch', 5 September 2008).

[10]  This was true of Malaya in the first half of the twentieth century. Late in the twentieth century women came to outnumber men in tertiary education.

[11]  A. Samad Ismail (1981) 'How the Reds Trapped Me', *Star*, 3 Feb.

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