

## **Malaysia Studies: Looking Back Moving Forward**

**PROFESSOR DATO' DR. ABDUL RAHMAN EMBONG**

**President**

**Malaysian Social Science Association**

**Cum Principal Research Fellow**

**Institute of Malaysian and International Studies (IKMAS)**

**Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia**

*Abridged version of the Presidential Address delivered at the Fourth International Malaysian Studies Conference (MSC4) held on 3-5 August 2004 at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM)*

The MSC4 is the flagship of the Malaysian Social Science Association, held biennially since 1997. Its objectives are to bring together scholars from Malaysia and abroad to deliberate on the various dimensions of Malaysian studies, to draw comparisons between Malaysia and other countries, to strengthen networking and community building among social science scholars, and to initiate collaborative activities of mutual benefit such as research, publications, workshops, and others so as to advance Malaysian studies.

This year's MSC - the fourth in the series - is the biggest so far showcasing four keynote addresses, three special plenary sessions, 140 papers presented in 38 concurrent sessions, two book launches, and a book fair participated by four national and international publishers. It has also brought together about 200 participants – the majority from the various Malaysian universities, while about a quarter from abroad, namely scholars from the ASEAN region (Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines), as well as from Japan, Australia, the United Kingdom, Germany, Finland, the United States, and Mexico. MSC4 is without doubt the most significant and the biggest Malaysian studies congress ever held in this region.

### **TWO-FOLD TASK**

The Malaysian Social Science Association was formed almost three decades ago in pursuance of the resolution passed at the first national social science conference held in this country, incidentally also at UKM on 17-18 August 1974. The resolution expressed the strong desire by an early generation of Malaysian social scientists who felt that we had to put our act together through an organised professional body whose mission was to advance Malaysian studies and make the social sciences serve the people and our developing nation in the best way

possible. It was also meant to represent the social science practitioners in their relations with other social scientists, the university, the Government, as well as other national and international bodies.

The Association has played and will continue to play a two-fold task – that of academic advancement, as well as public advocacy. As an oversight body on the social sciences as a profession, it is committed to the advancement of Malaysian studies to a greater height, as well as to ensuring that standards are not compromised, but maintained and enhanced in all our social science endeavour – be they teaching, research, publication, seminars, or other activities in the universities and other institutions of higher learning in Malaysia. Of these, the quality of teaching (including supervision) and research are of great concern to us. At the same time, the Association is also very concerned with capacity building especially in social science research and publication. Thus, it opens its platform to facilitate younger scholars to gain exposure and experience through its various activities as well as through its national and international networking. On another level, the Association has also participated in various ways to input our ideas into policy making in furtherance of our public advocacy agenda.

The Association is fully aware that it cannot achieve all these objectives by working alone. Thus, it has cooperated and will continue to cooperate with various social science faculties and institutes in our universities as well as with the Government and other relevant bodies to achieve this common goal. The MSC4 - officiated by the Minister for Higher Education, Dato' Dr Shafie Hj Mohd Salleh - is a good example of the synergy between PSSM working in consort with UKM and other institutions in the country to achieve our common goal of advancing Malaysian studies. We trust that by working together as a team, we can achieve our goals better and faster. We hope to devise more programmes in future in furtherance of our academic and public advocacy agenda by enlisting similar collaborations between our Association, various Universities, our partners from civil society, reputable international bodies like UNESCO, reputable national and international publishers and funders, Malaysianists from various parts of the world, and very importantly, the Government, namely the Higher Education Ministry. This will be high on our agenda in the next five years.

#### STATE OF MALAYSIAN STUDIES

As a professional Association, we are very concerned with the state of the social sciences (including humanities) in general and of Malaysian studies in particular. As we all know, the progress of Malaysian studies has been checkered and uneven. I beg your indulgence to bear with what I am going to say as food for our thought during this conference. I remember in 1974, when as a young lecturer, I raised in the national social science conference mentioned earlier

that sociology and the social sciences in general was on trial, that sociology was facing a crisis, and that the theories in sociology, namely the sociology of development was as underdeveloped as the underdeveloped countries to which it was applied, I was received with sharp criticisms from those representing the then social science establishment. But I am glad I stood my ground, and because our sociology and anthropology department in UKM then to some extent accepted that assessment, however grudgingly, and tailored our programme with those demands and criticisms in mind, we didn't do that badly.

What have been some of the comments on the state of Malaysian studies these last ten years or so? Some of you may still remember the famous (or the infamous) "sawdust" theory put forward by two leading lights of Malaysian social science — Rustam A. Sani and Norani Othman – in 1991, who liken some of the work in Malaysian studies to a "heap of sawdust". Two years later, on the platform of the Malaysian Social Science Association, the Malaysian pioneering anthropologist, the late Dato' Dr Mokhzani Rahim - a student of the great Raymond Firth – made a similar stinging remark that much of the work done by Malaysian scholars and Malaysianists are "more of the same" – meaning that the work has not gone beyond the usual old ground, with some reinventing wheel, and many are just sterile.

The criticisms cited above may be fully or partially justified, or they can simply be an over-kill. You can have an overview of the development of Malaysian studies if you care to read Shamsul's essay published in *Akademika*, in July 1998. Nevertheless, those carping observations – harsh as they may be - are a useful catalyst for our reflection and should be taken as a challenge to move forward. As the saying goes, "no self-reflection, no wisdom", and "no pain, no gain". I know some people may feel discouraged when faced with such criticisms. However, please rest assured that we fully understand that scholars, including many paper presenters at MSC4, are at different levels of maturity and experience, and everyone especially the younger scholars should be given all the encouragement, guidance and support they need for them to excel.

Why is it that some of our works are described this way by our own peers? Part of the answer perhaps lies in the way some of us approach or do things: Our conceptual and analytical framework sometimes may be slipshod, not well-grounded in theory and the state-of-the art; we sometimes build a 'tunnel-like' vision that sees only our own straight path, lacking in intellectual rigour, and not integrated with the whole, thus missing the big picture; or we sometimes have a high-sounding framework but lacks empirical substance; sometimes we are trapped in narrow empiricism in the name of data gathering; and sometimes we unconsciously fall prey to our own self-serving ego!

## LESSONS FROM JAMES SCOTT'S SELF-CRITICISM

Whatever the reasons may be, I urge you to revisit the experience of Professor James Scott, one of the doyen of Malaysian studies for an insight into our problems. In his keynote address at MSC1 in 1997, he publicly renounced his highly acclaimed first book, based on his PhD thesis on the Malaysian administrative elite, published in 1968 by the highly reputable Yale University Press. He simply regards it as a “bad book” which is not worth reading. Why? Because according to him, in that study, he - like many others of his generation - was trapped by “the law of the instrument”, i.e. by methodology and technique, so much so that the study became a “methodological exercise” rather than “writing a history, sociology, or anthropology of the Malaysian Civil Service that might be a lasting contribution to knowledge”. Now, just sit back and ask ourselves: Don’t many of us – we Malaysian scholars and Malaysianists who pride ourselves as experts in Malaysian studies - sometimes commit the same sin that Scott has openly admitted with great humility and candour? I think many of us at one time or another stand guilty as charged!

## NEED TO BE SELF-REFLECTIVE AND CRITICAL

I am saying all these not to throw cold water, but to draw your attention to our core business today, that is, to move forward with greater vigour and produce more work of higher quality. To my mind, quite a lot of the work in Malaysian studies are of high quality and we should be proud of them. We have made a significant contribution to the corpus of knowledge, just as we have provided important and strategic policy input. We have also a critical mass of renown scholars as well as a promising younger group of second and third level echelons. But we want to achieve more and better quality work, work that stands at the frontiers of knowledge and of high impact; we also want a greater number of committed scholars of high caliber who can be the new flag-bearers. This is our agenda. To achieve this, we must be reflective, self-critical, disciplined, committed, humble, readily accept criticisms, admit and address our shortcomings, and get out of the denial syndrome as well as the complacency mode. I think this culture of humility and of critical discourse as well as the “culture of agreeing to disagree” is of greater necessity today especially when many of our universities are repositioning themselves to be research-oriented or even research universities in response to the globalising forces.

I am sure you will all agree with me that this culture of self-criticism and openness, and of “agreeing to disagree” should not be confined to the scholarly community alone. This principle – which I believe is cherished by the Malaysian new administration - should indeed be institutionalised as part of the university environment and of governance at all levels from the university right up to the top administration of the country.