

**ADDRESS
BY
HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS
SULTAN NAZRIN MUIZZUDDIN SHAH**

**AT THE
IKIM INTERNATIONAL FORUM ON THE
ROYAL PROFESSOR UNGKU A. AZIZ**

**DATE: THURSDAY, 15 DECEMBER 2022
TIME: 10:00 AM**

**VENUE: INSTITUTE OF ISLAMIC UNDERSTANDING
MALAYSIA (IKIM), KUALA LUMPUR, MALAYSIA**

***“ROYAL PROFESSOR UNGKU AZIZ:
EXPANDING THE FRONTIERS OF DEVELOPMENT”***

Ladies and gentlemen,

1. It is my great pleasure to visit the Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (IKIM) during their 30th anniversary celebrations. And I am particularly delighted to address this international forum, paying tribute to the late Royal Professor Ungku Aziz by launching a book about him entitled, *Ungku Aziz's Vision of Development*, written by one of IKIM's Fellows, Muhammad Syafiq bin Borhanuddin.

2. Over the last thirty years, IKIM has become a leading platform in Malaysia for intellectual discourse on Islam, addressing current issues impacting our nation, as well as, increasingly, the global *ummah*. I trust that IKIM as a think tank will continue to contribute thought leadership not only towards nation building in Malaysia, but also towards expanding the frontiers of development for the global Muslim agenda. I hope that it will play a meaningful role in restoring Islamic civilization to its rightful place in the world.

3. Even though Ungku Aziz was of noble descent, and grew up in the city, his heart and thoughts were always attached to the underprivileged in rural areas. He was a spokesperson, a champion of sorts, for the concerns of the fishermen and the farmers, finding his place among the pioneers in Malaysia who not only stood up against socio-economic injustices but also offered concrete solutions to the economic challenge of inequality. His body of work, and its topics of interest, has greatly influenced the focus of my own work on inclusive development.¹

4. Beyond these material concerns, however, Ungku Aziz also appeared to be greatly preoccupied with the non-material – or inner – dimensions of development. So, the quality of the mind –

¹ Sultan Nazrin Shah, *Striving for Inclusive Development: From Pangkor to a Modern Malaysian State* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 2019).

attitudes; morality and ethics; culture; and even spirituality – were as important for him as the more material aspects of our quest for development as a nation. Indeed, they were perhaps even more important.

5. The wide-ranging scope of his vision of development, encompassing both worldly and spiritual dimensions is conveyed very effectively in this erudite book. The author has managed to do justice to the challenging task of covering the Royal Professor's sweeping intellectual concerns, and in a succinctly presented format as well. I commend him for this achievement which is a fine addition to the body of work on Ungku Aziz's legacy.

6. As he informs us, Ungku Aziz did not believe that narrow specialization is the best approach to addressing modern challenges. In fact, what some scholars today call "the blinkeredness of specialization" ironically adds to the corruption of knowledge and to problems in the world today.² As Ungku Aziz argued:

² This epistemological problem has been termed "the blinkeredness of specialization" in Afifi al-Akiti, "The Negotiation of Modernity Through Tradition in Contemporary Muslim Intellectual Discourse: The Neo-Ghazalian, Attasian Perspective," in *Knowledge, Language, Thought and the Civilization of Islam: Essays in Honor of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas*, eds. Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud and Muhammad Zainiy Uthman (Skudai: UTM Press, 2010), 121-123.

*“The traditional barriers between subjects are being reinforced by increasing scholarly specialisation.... (but) in reality, the problems of the modern world have not conveniently fitted themselves into the pigeonholes of university departments. Many problems involving complexity need to be studied from a cross-disciplinary approach.”*³

His daughter, Tan Sri Dr Zeti Akhtar Aziz, affirmed this approach, stating that her father wanted students to recognize different disciplines of knowledge, and did not limit his own interests to only one field.⁴

7. Ungku Aziz was not only an outstanding economist and an institution builder, he was also a farsighted thought leader and development thinker. This is reflected in his 5-volume work, *Writing for the Nation*,⁵ as well as in the flourishing of the numerous institutions with which he was associated throughout his long career. This book by Syafiq Borhanuddin provides us with another

³ Ungku A. Aziz, “The Role of the University in Asia in the 21st Century”, in *The Role of the University: A Global Perspective*, ed. Torsten Husen (Tokyo: The United Nations University, 1994), 58; cited in Muhammad Syafiq bin Borhanuddin, *Ungku Aziz’s Vision of Development: A Muslim’s Experience in the Modern Times* (Kuala Lumpur: IKIM Press, 2023), 64.

⁴ ‘Zeti: Dad Wanted Students to Recognise Different Disciplines’, *The Star* (6 August 2018).

⁵ Ungku A. Aziz, *Royal Professor Ungku A. Aziz: Writing for the Nation*, 5 vols. (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 2017).

invaluable source of information and insights about Ungku Aziz's philosophical ideas and his approach to development.

8. While it is known that he led the University of Malaya for twenty years with distinction, he also had a vision for universities more broadly. This reflected again his holistic understanding. As he stated in his 1994 article, 'The Role of the University in Asia in the 21st Century':

*"The Institution of Higher Learning must deliberately strive to build the characters of their scholars. In the past, this is the point where scholarship involved the training of a person to become caring, courteous, and cultured. This is the development of adab in Islam. It is possible that in the 19th and 20th centuries the concept of a secularized democratic university according to the Western model has encouraged designers of institutions of higher learning to abandon attempts to deal with this aspect of higher education."*⁶

9. In contrast to the dominant trends in higher education today, and in line with the classical Islamic tradition of *Adab Talibul 'Ilm*, Ungku Aziz held that the development of the character traits of

⁶ Ungku A. Aziz, "The Role of the University in Asia in the 21st Century", 58-59; cited in Syafiq Borhannuddin, *Ungku Aziz's Vision of Development*, 64.

scholars is as important as the pursuit of knowledge itself. This was farsighted on his part. The failure of modern higher education to pay due attention to this inner dimension of development has contributed to the emergence of individuals in leadership roles who lack the necessary character traits of integrity and discipline, despite their academic and other worldly achievements. This contributes to rampant corruption and other negative influences which hamper national development. Conversely, the introduction of an explicitly moral dimension of education, in which character-building (*tarbiyyah*) is given primacy – an approach which is well-known in the Muslim tradition⁷– would help to produce leaders committed to the good of all.

10. Moreover, Ungku Aziz's use of the term *adab* in relation to scholarship shows that he recognized and acknowledged this important concept for education and societal advancement, something that is reflected in the history of Islamic thought and civilization. For *adab*, as conveyed by the *ulama*, means to be 'civilized,' that is, to put things in their proper places. It is the prerequisite for the condition of justice to emerge both in the self, and in the world at large.

⁷ Franz Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant: The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam*, Brill Classics in Islam, no. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 2006).

11. Indeed, Ungku Aziz himself exemplified this notion of *adab* to the utmost of his ability, as can be seen in his conduct all his life. In his intellectual pursuits, although an economist by training, he cultivated continuous learning in the arts and the humanities throughout his life. He had a keen interest, for instance, in the Malay *pantun*, the great arts, literature, philosophies, and religions of the world.

12. Ungku Aziz is rightly celebrated for his contribution to the Muslim *ummah*. It should not be forgotten that his concern for the affairs of Islam and Muslim society went well beyond the idea of establishing *Tabung Haji* – Malaysia’s Pilgrims Fund which is admired throughout the Muslim world. We must also remember the important speech he delivered on Ibn Sina (d. 1037),⁸ at the Symposium Commemorating his 1000th Anniversary in 1981, when he paid homage to one of the greatest Muslim scientists and philosophers. We should remember, too, that he introduced a course on “Islamic Civilization” at the University of Malaya in 1985. He was actively involved in the Research Centre for Islamic History, Art and Culture (IRCICA) – the OIC counterpart to UNESCO –

⁸ Ibn Sina is commonly known in the West as Avicenna, whose textbooks on medicine, for instance, were used for hundreds of years in the great universities of Europe until the 18th century. See, Jon McGinnis, *Avicenna* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 227.

where he contributed a well-written paper in 1988.⁹ And from its foundation in 2005, Ungku Aziz was a member of the Governing Council at the International Centre for Education in Islamic Finance (INCEIF) – the global university of Islamic finance.

13. As the book sets out, Ungku Aziz viewed Islam as having a highly positive role in promoting development, and he elaborated this in various aspects of his work. He was well-read in the great works of the humanities of Islamic civilization, as well as in more purely religious texts, where he found valuable insights and lessons. He advocated that these should be read by every educated person, and especially by Muslims. Among the works which left a particular impression on him were Imam al-Ghazali's (d. 1111) *Alchemy of Happiness (Kimiya-e Sa'adat)* – one of the great works on Sufism and character-development; Mawlana Rumi's (d. 1273) great masterpiece of Sufi poetry, the *Mathnawi*; and Ibn Khaldun's (d. 1406) *Muqaddimah* – a landmark work which studies the rise and fall of civilizations in a multi-disciplinary way.

14. Ungku Aziz's interest in the field of Muslim literature was such that he even took the trouble to publish books himself, including the

⁹ Ahmed Lajimi and Zeynep Durukal (eds.), *Research in Islamic Civilisation: Outlook for the Coming Decade. Proceedings of the International Seminar Held on 26-29 September 1988 at IRCICA, Istanbul, Turkey.* (Istanbul: IRCICA, 1992).

Oldest Known Malay Manuscript edited by Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas at the University of Malaya. This was based on an original manuscript concerning Islamic theology, which Ungku Aziz had acquired from London in 1984.¹⁰

15. Ungku Aziz actively promoted Islamic art and its literary heritage, in part because he felt it “*could fill the void in (contemporary) Malay art and culture.*”¹¹ He viewed it as a powerful means of regaining access to an intellectual heritage which had been lost through the process of colonization. So Islamic, and Malay, culture, could help in the necessary decolonization of the minds of Malays. He suggested that Islamic art and literature be introduced in schools and universities – for the latter, as part of the broader and more holistic approach to teaching, including the cultivation of *adab*. He proposed that the beauty of Islam should be emphasised, through greater efforts to share the wonderful arts and literature of Islamic civilization. Through this means, the religion’s true beauty would attract the world’s attention in a positive way.

16. It is perhaps not surprising that, as the first Director-General of the Institute of Language and Literature, the *Dewan Bahasa dan*

¹⁰ Al-Nasafi, *The Oldest Known Malay Manuscript: A 16th Century Malay Translation of the ‘Aqa'id of Al-Nasafi*, ed. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1988).

¹¹ *New Straits Times* (30 October 1984), cited in Syafiq Borhannuddin, *Ungku Aziz's Vision of Development*, 111.

Pustaka, Ungku Aziz felt that Malays who considered themselves educated should be able to recognize the Jawi script in Malay books of the previous centuries. He felt, moreover, that they should at least be familiar with the different styles of Arabic scripts, which was common knowledge among Muslim intellectuals in the classical period. This, again, was part of his vision to reclaim the intellectual heights of the past, which should be part of the proud heritage of Malays throughout the region.

17. Ungku Aziz thus closely integrated his religious beliefs and interests with his worldly concerns, without drawing any dichotomy between them. Rather, he exemplified a true complementarity between the two worlds: the religious and the secular. He fully embraced the inner, more spiritual, dimensions of development, at the same time as pursuing its outer material and worldly concerns, as I mentioned earlier.

Ladies and gentlemen,

18. We must be clear that a nation's development is linked not only to how much money we have, or to how many modern buildings and highways we can construct. There are countries with the finest state-of-the-art buildings that money can buy, *yet* where unemployment and poverty – in the sense of economic *as well as*

spiritual poverty – are still widespread. True development, rather, entails holistic progress in all areas, and must include its non-material elements and inner dimensions.

19. The Royal Professor Ungku Aziz understood this well, as is reflected in his holistic conception of development. He put forward this approach in his 1983 article, “Must Patterns of Change in Developing Countries Follow the West?”, stating:

*“Change in Muslim states should not merely follow Western patterns, rather, it is their duty (the Muslim states) to identify changes that would promote both a better material as well as a better spiritual world. When the Muslims are materially better off and are recipients of improved services, they will be able to fulfil their roles as good Muslims better... We are not seeking change for the sake of change but rather for material and spiritual betterment.”*¹²

20. Ungku Aziz also highlighted the enduring relevance of the historic experience of Muslim civilization in building inter-civilizational bridges today, as he put it:

¹² Ungku A. Aziz, “Must Patterns of Change in Developing Countries Follow the West?: What Other Possible Patterns?”, Paper presented at the Association of Commonwealth Universities Congress, Birmingham (16 August 1983); cited in Syafiq Borhannuddin, *Ungku Aziz’s Vision of Development*, 73.

“Over the course of a thousand years, from Spain to Persia to India, all influences were absorbed. In the seventh and eighth centuries they took Byzantine coins and simply over-stamped them, without worrying about the fact that they bore representational designs. Architecture furnishes many of the most striking examples of cultural diversity. Start at Alhambra and move east through Persia into southern Russia, looking at the domes and towers in Tashkent for example: you see a tremendous variety of styles. In India, a very sophisticated Mogul civilization was able for a certain time to co-exist with the even older culture of the Hindus. The Islamic experience as a whole has not ceased to be instructive today.”¹³

21. All of this shows that, in Ungku Aziz’s holistic vision of development, religion need not be an obstacle to economic progress. Rather, it becomes a motivation that can help to expand the frontiers of development – provided it is understood in its more comprehensive and civilizational sense.

¹³ Ungku A. Aziz, “High Culture, Low Culture,” *Look Japan* (April 1988); cited in Syafiq Borhannuddin, *Ungku Aziz’s Vision of Development*, 74.

22. I hope that this international forum on the Royal Professor will serve as the impetus to expand the frontiers of development, building on the efforts of Ungku Aziz by applying his vision. His approach should encourage us to rethink and expand our understanding of 'development' - understood both in the expected, external – that is, material, and socio-economic – sense. But also, in the rather unexpected inner, intellectual, spiritual, and civilizational sense.

23. An alternative understanding of development is much-needed in our present moment, when climate change and other dynamics threaten the very basis of the progress we have enjoyed to date. Indeed, the emergence of new and alternative economic development models in the last decade or so, including the Sustainable Development Goals, and the Environmental, Social, and Corporate Governance indicators, vindicate Ungku Aziz's vision for holistic development.

24. I would like to pay tribute to Ungku Aziz's late wife, Sharifah Azah Al-Saggoff, or Azah Aziz. She is an important cultural icon of the Malay world, for her efforts in preserving our culture and tradition, for contributing harmoniously alongside her husband to the inner development of this country, and for being a source of strength to her family. Her legacy is also continuing, with her private

collection of Malay world textiles to be displayed in a new museum,¹⁴ something which will contribute to the important process of restoring our pre-colonial history and culture. May Allah *subhanahu wa-ta'ala* bless and reward them abundantly, who have both passed on to the next world, for their lasting contributions to this great nation, amin!

25. On that tribute, it is with great pleasure that I now launch *Ungku Aziz's Vision of Development: A Muslim's Experience in Modern Times* by Syafiq Borhannuddin, at this IKIM International Forum on the Royal Professor.

¹⁴ The Merdeka Textile Museum, Kuala Lumpur.