



O c c a s i o n a l P a p e r S e r i e s

The New Malay:
His Role
and Future

Association of Muslim Professionals Singapore

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The New Malay: His Role and Future

Professor Syed Hussein Alatas

This paper is a transcription of a lecture delivered by Professor
Syed Hussein Alatas on 21 January 1995 at the Kent Ridge Guild
House, National University of Singapore

Association of Muslim Professionals

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FOREWORD

The concept of "Melayu Baru" or "New Malay" gained prominence at a time when the Singapore Malay society is entering a new phase of development. As the next millennium is fast approaching, the Malays are now showing greater confidence of the future. They are now more determined to play greater roles to further the progress of the community and that of the nation as a whole.

But what does the concept of the "New Malay" mean? When the subject was hotly discussed both in Singapore and Malaysia, various definitions were floated. They ranged from views which reflect a more enlightened understanding of the concept to that which are spurious and intellectually fatuous. An example of the latter include the idea that a new Malay is a successful corporate person (*Melayu korporat* or "corporate Malay"). Such a perception betrays the concept of an ideal personality type for the Malay. It is too narrow and fraught with worrying consequences if one understands its full implications. But we should quickly add here that the Malay/Muslim culture is not averse to the mercantile spirit. In fact, as many scholars can testify, the Malay world prior to the arrival of the Europeans was not short of thriving cities with its merchant class actively engaged in trading with other parts of the world. How could this not be so when Islam, the religion of the Malays, itself thrived in its early years through the support of prominent members of the Meccan merchant class?

The true conception of what the "New Malay" is should be based on fundamental values cherished by Islam and the Malay culture. Other conceptions which depart from this is seriously flawed. As explained by Professor Syed Hussein Alatas in his lecture, the most distinguishing aspect of the "New Malay" from the "Old Malay" is the critical spirit which rejects past values that contradict the system of values inherent in Islam and the Malay culture. It is a spirit which places a high regard to the importance of reason and moral uprightness.

It should be remarked here that prior to Professor Alatas' lecture, held at the Kent Ridge Guild House, National University of Singapore on 21 January 1995, interest on the subject of the "New Malay" had already begun to wane. Despite the numerous discussions and seminars held when the interest on the subject was at its peak, debates on the concept has now lost its momentum. It is all the more disappointing that this occurred when a deeper understanding of the concept had not even taken root.

Hopefully, the lecture by Professor Alatas published in this AMP Occasional Paper Series will not only reignite interest on the issue but also help to create a better conception of the "New Malay".

Editorial Committee
AMP Occasional Paper Series

The 'New Malay': His Role and Future

Introduction

This topic was first discussed on 23 December 1979 at the Dewan Lee Kong Chian in Singapore where I was the guest speaker for the occasion of awarding literary prizes by Majlis Pusat. The topic of the lecture was "Towards Excellence in Literature". In the course of discussing the role of writers, one of the things I mentioned was the need to concentrate on the theme of the "New Malay". Of course, the "New Malay" or "Melayu Baru" is just a term. The important thing is to discuss the concept. It is very easy to have a new term but it is more difficult to have a new concept.

Several years later, I discussed this again in Melaka at the Munshi Abdullah Lecture Series organised by Gapena (the Malaysian Writers Association). More or less the same theme was expanded and again I emphasised on the need to pay attention to this concept of the "New Malay". A few months later, this was published in Kuala Lumpur in the *Dewan Sastera*. A few months after that publication, the Malaysian Prime Minister introduced the theme of the "New Malay" and as a result, national attention followed suit. Now the theme has become very much the concern of politicians in Malaysia.

But of course, we have to understand what the term "New Malay" means and also to consider the fact that it can be easily abused. For instance, if you do not like a person, you will say he is an "Old Malay" but if you are in favour of a person, you will say he is a "New Malay". This has been going on and I think it is necessary for us to go

deeper into the concept of the "New Malay" so that we will not fall into the pitfall of allowing the term to be misused.

The meaning of "New Malay"

What I mean by the "New Malay" is not something which exists out of nothing. You can say that of certain things, for example, the aeroplane. The aeroplane is a completely new creation - there was no aeroplane in the past. But when you talk about a new breed of horses, it is not a new or sudden creation without continuity with the past. Whether it is a new or old breed of horses, they are still horses. Thus, the usage of the term "New Malay" is analogous with the example of the horses - a new breed but continuous with the past.

The "New Malay" does not also mean new in terms of age. We do not mean to say that the "New Malay" is a young Malay. It is not a generation concept but a typology. It has nothing to do with age groups but with types of personality. We call this type of personality new simply because more and more of such types are emerging at this time and more people are aware of it. This mentality, however, had existed in the past. There were such personalities who possessed this type of mentality but it was not pervasive and did not dominate Malay society then.

I would like to elaborate on what is meant by a "New Malay". A "New Malay" is not a Malay who is entirely different from the present day Malay. He is not a Malay who is alien to Malay culture but one who discards elements of Malay culture which are not consistent with Malay values and advanced philosophy. For example, there were

certain aspects of the feudal Malay culture of the past which glorified amoral values, might and the "vulgar" aspects of feudalism. There were often cases where people were praised for kidnapping and killing in order to glorify the ruler. This is not consistent with Malay values. The Malays of that period would no doubt be horrified by the actions of such people had they known that. There was also a well-known case of the kidnapping of a princess from Pahang by the followers of the Sultan of Melaka, which resulted in several people being killed. The Malays in Pahang were not happy with the kidnapping of their princess since not only was she kidnapped but she was also forced to become the wife of the Sultan. These acts were not consistent with the Malay values of that period but they were noted in historical texts. These historical texts were then glorified and presented by British colonial writers as being representative of Malay culture. This presentation has some influence, the latest manifestation of which was the issue of the constitutional amendment in Malaysia.

The constitution was amended in order not to allow the Sultans to be above the law. I had myself taken an active part in the press in favour of this amendment but was very surprised that there were some people including learned judges and intellectuals who opposed the amendment. Their stand was that the position of the Sultans was a part of Malay tradition and culture. But it was never in the genuine Malay tradition that a king can kill anybody he likes or take anybody's wife or property. When that happened, it happened through the use of force. It did not happen through consent of the heart. Therefore, when we talk about the "New Malay", it is, in a way, a Malay with a new

consciousness. This new consciousness of the Malays will be selective of positive and negative influences that have been left by the past. Such a selection must be done; otherwise, it will be very difficult to cope with the present.

We have laid the grounds that the "New Malay" has nothing to do with age. A man who is advanced in years possessing this kind of personality - rational, moral and selective - is a "New Malay". But a Malay who is a little bit confused as far as moral values are concerned, who is a little bit inconsistent and who has no clear aims and thinking of what a good society should be is the feudal "Old Malay".

Apart from the "Old" and "New Malay", there is at present another phenomenon which bears no relevance to the Malay past. This is the "Melayu Arus". "Arus" in Malay means "drifting" or "adrift". The "Melayu Arus" is the Malay who has drifted from anchorage without any direction, like the drift of a coconut. When a coconut starts drifting along a river, there is no sense of direction involved; it will eventually land in a swamp. The "Drift Malay" is also neither here nor there. This is a phenomenon which we have to think about as far as the Malay community in Singapore is concerned. Drifting is not the general intention of communal life in any part of the world. All societies do not encourage drifting. If drifting exists, it is a reaction to some crisis situation.

Traits of the "New Malay"

The "New Malay" has certain characteristics or traits. One of them is rationality. The "New Malay" views the world in a more

rational manner. He reasons, calculates and plans. He does not subscribe to mere rationality but it is rationality combined with certain universality. In the case of the Malay community, there is already a built-in system of universality. The Malays are Muslims and being Muslims, they participate in certain universality by belonging to a world religion having a universal system of values. It will be easier for Malays, therefore, to participate in universality as they have been doing in the past.

The influence of rationality and universality has taken place in Malay society in the course of some centuries. For instance, the Malays have undergone many changes as far as criminal law is concerned. The coming of the British brought about changes in criminal law. Long before that, there was already this process of change in criminal law with the coming of Islam, making it more universal rather than the old, particularistic and, at times, highly irrational system of law.

One example was during the period of the Sultanate of Melaka. According to its maritime law, it was possible for anybody who was fishing on a boat in the Melaka harbour to catch anything caught by his fishing hook, including the wife of a captain. So if you were to catch the wife of a captain with your fishing hook, you could have her. The idea was that in fishing, if anything was caught by others, it is your responsibility as the owner not to allow it to drift. If your property drifted and was caught by another fishing hook, you would lose it and would have no right over it, even if it was your wife. This is not acceptable in Islamic law. If the wife of a captain was caught by your fishing hook, you would be placed under investigation,

not the wife of the captain. The argument was that the wife could be having a bath, swimming or simply exercising her freedom. If you happened to catch her with your hook, you were the one who was responsible. Your conduct should be examined. It is, thus, a different type of rationality which is involved here. There is a lot of non-rational laws in the region which were modified after the coming of Islam. With the coming of colonialism, more of such laws were modified.

The "Old Malay" can be either young or old, one who does not want to make a distinction between the rational and non-rational and has a firm emotional loyalty to the culture without knowing what it is and without questioning it. It is the "New Malay" who applies rationality to establish the correct values. Such a personality had appeared in Malay history. Thus, when we talk about the "New Malay", we should begin with the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The person on record as far as history is concerned whom we would consider a "New Malay" is Abdullah Munshi. From his writings, we get the impression that his thinking, philosophy of life, personality and all their manifestations were that of a "New Malay".

Of course, we cannot judge "Old" and "New Malay" purely in terms of politics. It is not a political concept. If Abdullah was pro-British, he did not become "Old Malay" simply because he was pro-British. There were pro-British people of the "Old Malay" type and also of the "New Malay" type like Abdullah. After Abdullah, there may have been others not in historical records. However, as far as historical records in Southeast Asia are concerned, Rizal from the Philippines was the first "new" Southeast Asian after Abdullah. Rizal

came around half a century later. Both he and Abdullah were dedicated to their culture. In terms of personality, they manifested what we consider the "New Man" in Southeast Asia.

Overlapping historical periods

There is another aspect of this problem. We are now living in a most interesting historical period. It is the post-nineteenth century period (after the Industrial Revolution) where the world has developed a number of unique traits which did not exist before. This phenomenon, which has relevance to our discussion, is what historians and sociologists term the "overlapping of historical periods". Before the modern period (that is, the nineteenth century), there was no overlapping of historical periods. It was only in modern times that the overlapping of historical periods occurred. I will give some instances of what is meant by the overlapping of historical periods.

To the present generation of Singaporeans, let us say those in their thirties, this phenomenon would not be very clear. I know there are many Singaporeans in that age group who have never seen a frog. They have never seen fruits which I saw when I was young. There are many dress forms of which they are not aware. There are even dishes of which they do not know. These things have disappeared from their orbit of experience. If you talk to people who are in their fifties, they would be more aware of the overlapping of historical periods.

Let me cite instances from my own personal life. I was in school in Johor Bahru in 1936. I stayed with my uncle who was working with the Johor government. In his house, we have the

overlapping of historical periods. He went to the office in a Ford car. His friends had Raleigh bicycles which were extremely popular at that time. They also smoked a very popular brand of cigarettes called *Rough Rider* which came in a green packet with a picture of a rider with a cowboy hat. I went to school in a rickshaw. When I came home from school at one o'clock in a rickshaw, my uncle would come home for lunch in his Ford car. So, the modern period, represented by the Ford car, existed side by side with the traditional, represented by the old rickshaw, which had been in existence for quite some time even after the invention of the metal wheel.

When I went back to Indonesia after that, I visited some people in the town of Bogor, staying for a few days in a valley there. That valley had no electricity, gas nor tap water. Yet the house was a modern one made of bricks and concrete, with modern furniture. That house was a concentration of historical periods. The gentleman living there was a religious person and a healer. He treated severe mental cases. I remember meeting two of his patients who were from a mental hospital. They were hopeless cases. One was a violent person whom the healer managed to keep calm. The other smiled all the time. The hospital had given up on him. There was nothing they could do for him. His case was also unusual. He had a mental breakdown on his wedding night, just before or during the *bersanding* ceremony. He never recovered and was now being treated in the traditional way. At one time, when the patients first arrived, if I am not mistaken, they were given a bath with goat's blood. Years later, here in Singapore, while I was working at the National University of Singapore, I remembered

that case when I was reading about psychiatry and related matters. Then I understood the reason why goat's blood was used to bathe these mental patients. Apparently, it was a form of shock treatment. Today, we use the electric shock. During that time, they used goat's blood because when you see blood being poured on you, you might get a shock.

Coming back to the house in Bogor, there was no electricity, lights nor water pipes. In the bathroom, there was a small pond. They collected rainwater, and washing and bathing were done in the river early in the morning at about four or five and also in the evening. The river was about five minutes away. Just a fifteen-minute walk from this area were outwardly similar houses but with electricity and many other things belonging to the present world. So here we see both periods still existing side by side.

Public transportation then was mainly in the form of horse carriages, although there were trains and trams. Very few people had cars. This overlapping of historical periods persisted for decades. If you go to Jakarta, very seldom would you see a horse carriage, but if you go to a place about two hours from Jakarta, even Bogor, there are still some around. If you go further down to Sukabumi, there would be more horse carriages. According to recent visitors to the valley in Bogor, the same situation still prevails - no electricity nor tap water. People continue bathing in the river. The religious healer has passed away but I am sure there is someone who will adopt his technique of using goat's blood to treat mental patients.

Impact on the mind

I note this overlapping of historical periods because in the mind, the overlapping is much stronger than what is outside, that is, the tangible overlapping. There was a very unusual and interesting murder case in Malaysia. An Assemblyman in Pahang was brutally murdered and chopped into eighteen pieces. What is interesting is, in the course of the trial, certain things surfaced. One of the three accused claimed to be some kind of a *bomoh*, somebody who practices faith healing as well as sorcery, for the murdered man. He claimed to have sold the Assemblyman a cane and a *songkok*, a Malay man's cap, reportedly belonging to the late President Sukarno for RM 2 million. This is very difficult to believe. Who would pay RM 2 million for a cane and a cap? The reason was that the cane and the cap were believed to have magical powers. If you possess them, you may be able to exert your will and succeed in certain things.

Amongst the things which the *bomoh* claimed to have done was to assist this murdered gentleman to undermine and overthrow his political rival. In short, his job was to help people undermine and overthrow others politically. If you have this overlapping historical periods in your mind, you would use the services of such faith healers. I believe many people including university graduates, physicians, lawyers, judges and those from all ranks of education, possess such overlapping historical periods. I would not be surprised if many people would like to buy that cap and cane. The question is the price. Some may not be able to afford RM 2 million but if the price is reduced, many people would buy them. Another revealing thing was that the

bomoh told the court that he had made more than RM 4.9 million from selling talismans (*tangkal*). He sold each talisman for RM 7000. I do not know whether the figures are accurate but I am convinced he did manage to sell a few thousand. It is something that people would go for. I know of thousands of people who spend hundreds and thousands of ringgit on such things. If they are not well, they spend money on magical healing. At the same time, they would go to a doctor.

Here is a typical example of overlapping historical periods in the mind. A few months ago, I met somebody from outside Kuala Lumpur. He had a swelling on his neck. It was definitely some kind of tumour. This swelling was accompanied by occasional fever. The characteristic classical symptom of cancer was there. The swelling became bigger and bigger but he refused to go to a specialist for treatment. I tried my best to persuade him to go to the University Hospital at least for a check-up but he would not do that. Why? He had already gone to a *bomoh*. He believed the swelling was due to a sort of a misguided sorcery missile. He had a very close friend who was having problems with his wife which eventually led to a divorce. According to him, the wife was trying to harm his friend. However, the missile had hit him instead of his friend. He already had such an explanation in his mind. He believed it and would not go for treatment. Now this overlapping of historical periods in the mind can have fatal consequences. This is not an isolated case but one which is rampant everywhere.

We have seen that this particular overlapping of historical periods has consequences for certain life problems but there are also

many instances of overlapping historical periods which have no connection with health but with other aspects like attitude, outlooks on life and a sense of inaction. Sometimes, when you are faced with certain problems you do not act to solve the problem. Rather, you spend time relieving the effect of that problem. For instance, if a person is unemployed, he is immediately uncomfortable with his condition. But then, his reaction is not to quickly look for employment, but to tackle the immediate unpleasant situation - the unpleasant state of mind. Attention is focused on the effect of the problem rather than the problem itself. This has something to do with the overlapping of historical periods because in the past, problems very often cannot be solved. For instance, in the past, you were forced to work for the ruler, forced to leave the village and your home for months assisting in the ruler's war efforts without being paid. It was part of the rights of the ruling class to do that. You could not solve that problem. You had to go through with it. What you could do was to try to solve the effect. You tried to react to the effect; how to make it bearable but you did not think of getting away from it. You just had to go through with it. This kind of attitude and mentality of the past may still be present. There may still be an overlapping of historical periods in the mind.

When we talk of the "New Malay", it is not a simple discussion of the term. The term is not important. You can use any other term. Rather, it is more the study, the awareness and the implications of the concept itself. We know for instance that many people can talk about cats and dogs. Let us talk about cockroaches. Everybody can talk about cockroaches. Everybody knows what a

cockroach is. But do they have a deeper understanding of what a cockroach is? It takes years of study to understand the cockroach and there are many mysterious and interesting things about the cockroach. So a mere familiarity with the term does not mean that you understand the concept, even though you use the term in a rather pervasive way.

This problem of the "New Man" has occurred all over the world. We have the same problem in Japan. They may not use the term "New Japanese". But they do have this problem of "creating" another personality which is Japanese and related to the Japanese past, but more developed and up to date and at the same time does not turn his back on fundamental Japanese values. China also had to go through that period. During the time of Sun Yat Sen, China had this problem of developing the "New Chinese" for the present age. Thus, each society will have their own set of problems. The Malay community will have their own set of problems, which may not be the same as the Japanese, in trying to arrive at a redefinition of their personality and of what they want to preserve and consolidate.

I recently read on my way here in the plane an extremely fascinating item. Several schools which were unique in the entire universe were started in Japan. Never before in the history of mankind has there been such schools. This is the school for smiling. The Japanese felt they have to learn how to smile because there were certain aspects of Japanese culture which were against smiling. In the past, they were not encouraged to smile. It was not considered as proper behaviour. You had to look very stern. As a result, some of them have lost the capacity to smile. Among the pupils in the school were

company directors and professionals. They all have to learn how to smile. The "New Japanese" will now have to overcome this problem of smiling. But in the case of the Malays, it is the opposite. They smile all the time.

The importance of rational outlook

The problem, as far as the Malays are concerned, is getting rid of negative feudal values of the past and developing greater rationality in everything, not only in health matters but in the awareness and appraisal of things universal. They already have a link with Islam which enable them to look at a problem not only from a Malay point of view. There are also universal elements in the problem. One example is this. There are many Malays in Singapore who are drug addicts. I was told that a high proportion of the population in rehabilitation centres were Malays. The same situation occurs in Malaysia where a high proportion of recognised drug addicts are Malays. When you have such a problem in Malay society, the approach of the "New Malay" is to analyse the particular as well as the universal aspects of drug addiction. There are certain things which are comparable with other societies vis-à-vis drug addiction. But there are certain things which are probably peculiar to the Malay community.

This problem should also not be allowed to affect the Malay sense of pride. We should not feel that because there is a high proportion of Malay drug addicts in Singapore and Malaysia, Malays are only good for drugs. That is not correct. Once you do that you destroy harmony and your conception of people. In a discussion some years ago, somebody spoke to me about this problem. He was a non-

Malay. He was speaking as though it was a big problem in Singapore. I said it is a problem. If you want to talk in terms of prison population, I said a high proportion of acid throwers in prison are non-Malays. If you take the prison population as reflecting the outside community, it is very dangerous. For instance, a high proportion of wife beaters and those who commit violent crimes in prison are not Malays. Must you then connect this with the personality type of the outside community? If you say that drug addiction is part of Malay culture, then I ask if acid throwing, which is worse, is part of Chinese or Indian culture?

The Malays have to take a rational approach to the problem of drug addiction. They have to tackle it as a problem without allowing it to cast a sort of doubt on the resilience, strength and nature of the community's system of values. The Malay system of values is never in favour of drugs but there are some Malays who are weak. On the other hand, in Malaysia, for instance, there are generally very few Malays who are guilty of drunk driving. A very high percentage of fatal drunk drivers are not Malays. The same thing with violent crimes or robbery. One should not get upset and allow this to create doubt in one's own community because of the existence of some criminals or delinquents.

Coming back to the problem of the overlapping of historical periods, there is yet another phenomenon that we have to bear in mind which is also affecting different societies in the world. It arises from the clash between different periods and different times. It is some kind of a wild cultural synthesis where traditional elements are applied to a new situation without any basis in the traditional situation. In the past, there was no election in Malay society. It is a recent phenomenon which

started in 1957. There was also no election *bomoh*. Now, we have thousands of election *bomohs*. For instance, a candidate will go to a *bomoh* who will offer advice and prescription for the election. This is a synthetic phenomenon. It did not exist in the past and is new. But the synthesis itself is a wild kind of synthesis on how to overthrow people. This is a part of current practices which is, strictly speaking, not part of Malay culture. Not everything practiced by a society is part of their culture, such as certain forms of black magic.

In Thailand, maybe to some extent in India, and also amongst the Malays, you have a love potion which is not recognised as part of the Malay culture. It is prohibited by the Islamic religion, but it is practised. This love potion is what Malays in Kelantan call *minyak mati dibunuh*, that is, oil from a person who has been killed. The oil is extracted from the dead person by roasting his chin.

According to those who practise this belief, the person has to be killed either by law (that is, sentenced to death) or by bandits. Once he is killed, they take a few drops of oil from the corpse. If they cannot do it in the mortuary, they will probably take the corpse from the grave. Some burning coal are placed under the chin to get a few drops of oil which is extremely valuable. It is more valuable than gold because these few drops of oil is mixed with bottles of other oil. This is called serial dilution. The oil is mixed in a glass, which is then mixed in a bottle. This is then mixed with more oil until a substantial amount of oil is obtained. The oil is then put in very small phials. How is it used? You are supposed to smear a little bit of the oil on the object of your love without her being aware of it, for instance, while shaking her hand.

Then you should disappear from her sight for a week. The potion will start to work during that week and when you meet her again after that week, she will fall for you.

This kind of practice is not part of Malay culture. It spreads from the north from Thailand and is done clandestinely. This is a wild kind of synthesis. The task of the "New Malay" is to avoid such practices and to order his life in a more rational manner which is consistent with the Malay tradition, with religion and the requirements of the time. Only when this is achieved can he say that he has managed to enter the new age.

Conclusion

The problem of the "New Man" first appeared in European history. There were many extremely interesting studies on this. One example was the well-known classic by Jacob Burckhardt entitled *The Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy*. In pre-revolution Russia of the nineteenth century, there was a great deal of discussion on the "New Man" who should emerge in Russian society and the difference between the "New Russian" and the "Old Russian". Thus, what the Malays are going through now in Singapore and Malaysia is entering into that process more consciously, so that the outcome can be better perceived and assessed.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

*The following questions and answers are compiled
from the AMP lecture on 21 January 1995
at the Kent Ridge Guild House,
National University of Singapore*

Questions & Answers

Question: Sometime in February 1991, there was a local newspaper report on the Malays stating that the problem for Malays is that they are Muslims. If they are just Malays, there would be no problem. On the contrary, I would think that had it not been for Islam, the Malays would be much more different. We are also much more respectable now because as you are aware, we have made great progress in education since 1980.

Answer: My first comment on your question is regarding the statement that the problem with the Malays is that they are Muslims or they want to be Muslims at the same time. I think the response to that is very easy and short - just say, "The problem with you is you are ignorant". But to ignorant people, the dialogue may not be worth it. When you make such statements you must clarify, define and elaborate as to what is meant by why it is a problem being a Muslim. They have to elaborate and cannot just say that the problem with you is because you are what you are, without further elaboration. You have to insist that there is an elaboration. Only then can an understanding of the situation be reached. As a Muslim, I do not take pork. It is an issue for which I bear the responsibility. If, when overseas, I am invited to a dinner and I cannot touch the food, I am the one who feels it, not my hosts. But why should it be a problem for me if I decide not to eat pork? I will always tell them that if they think that it is because of my religion that I cannot eat whatever I want, then the whole world is a problem, because every society avoids certain things. I cannot tell a vegetarian Hindu that the problem with him is his religion because he does not eat

meat. I cannot go to Holland and tell the Dutch that the problem with them is their religion and culture because they do not eat dogs, cats and monkeys. Even with the Chinese, the problem with them is their culture because they do not eat mutton. There are certain types of meat and food that every community avoids. Food avoidance is not a problem to anyone as long as you do not force it on to other people. I do not see the meaningfulness of the statement that "the problem with you is that you are a Muslim". It is equally meaningless to say that of any religion. You cannot say that "the problem is you are a Christian, a Hindu or a Buddhist". You cannot make that statement unless it is qualified and elaborated. If somebody says "the problem with Muslims is that you allow polygamy", now that is at least qualified and you can discuss it. There is some reason behind it. But a general statement is not a proper statement.

Question: What can we Malays do to ensure a better future for our children? For example, what has just been said about being a Muslim. Personally, I feel that in order for me to be a good Malay, I must try very hard to be a good Muslim first. We are now living in a world where Muslims are often condemned. We are on the verge of entering the twenty-first century. We are losing certain aspects of our heritage one by one. How are we going to tackle and overcome this problem?

Answer: It is very interesting that we need to repeat and remind ourselves of the same problem over and over again. I remember in July 1967 when I was invited by the Muslim Missionary Society (Jamiyah)

in Geylang to give a lecture on the problems of the Malay society in Singapore. At that time, I saw that the most fundamental problem of the Singapore Malay society was the development of the personality - the will to achieve, the ability to concentrate and the need to make an effort. This is up to the Malays. I notice that when Malays put their minds on doing something in which they are very interested, they can do it. On the other hand, when they are not interested, nothing can force them to do it. For instance, it is almost impossible to force the Malays to play chess. There are some Malays who play chess, but they are not interested in competing when it is possible to do so at the world level. There are people in Indonesia, for instance, the Bataks, who are good chess players because they put their hearts in the game. The Malays in Singapore are extremely interested in football and other sports, so much so that Malays participate in most national sports, with excessive achievement in football. Thus, if the Malays put their minds on certain things, they can do them. It is a question of giving their attention. As for the question of future development, the first thing is not to allow yourself to be herded; *jangan digiring, kalau digiring jadi itik*. Have an independent outlook. The important thing is to have the correct objective. If I were a Malay parent, my objective would be to tell my children to choose a career and excel in that career. But I will not herd my children like ducks and tell them, "Make money. Make money everywhere". If I have a child who is interested in painting, I will let him be a very good painter. If I have a child who is interested in taking up law, I will encourage him to be a good lawyer. Suppose you have a child who wants to open a restaurant. It is good as long as he works

hard at it and excels. It is not necessary for everybody to be a banker, a company director or a tycoon. The progress of the community does not depend on that. It depends on an all-round development. Nothing should prevent the Malays from achieving anything they want within the Singapore set-up. For example, as long as a Malay meets the entry requirements for entering the university in Singapore, there will be no problem. It is easy to lead a student's life in Singapore. In other countries, like Indonesia, Malaysia, India, Pakistan and the Philippines, if you are a student, there is the problem of coming to the campus from home, which may involve hours and hours travelling by bus over difficult conditions. Even in Malaysia, many of the Malay students in Kuala Lumpur come from outside the city, for example, Kelantan. They have to be away from home to study. But in Singapore, it is very easy. You get out of your apartment, there is a bus stop and within a short period you will reach the campus. You do not have to leave your home to be a student. The smallness of Singapore facilitates many things. What then prevents the Malay student from achieving in his studies? Nothing. Many Malays are now teaching in school. Nobody can prevent them from becoming expert teachers. Nobody can prevent the Malay history teacher from developing knowledge of history, coming up with history books and becoming known as the national historian of Singapore, just as nobody can prevent a Malay from being a football champion of Singapore. Malays excel in football and singing but not in other areas because they do not set their minds on them. What we have to do is to redirect their attention to other areas and once the attention is there, then it will be possible for Malays

generally to develop more in different areas.

Question: What confuses me is the fact that many Malays that I know of in Singapore are still visiting the "bomoh". It is simple to say that we should not be doing it. As Muslims, we were taught a long time ago that these practices are all unacceptable to Islam. But even after having known that, we still to a certain extent practise it. I am concerned about how this practice can be changed since it is in danger of becoming part of our culture now although we have been taught and have heard through sermons that it is against our religion. As a community leader, I want to change that. To take your example of the person with the cancerous swelling. Now, he is a Muslim and has a problem. He went to see a doctor and was told that he had only three more months to live. Being a person of intellect, you would believe that based on scientific principles. You would then say, "I accept it. It is God's will that I am going to die". But your relatives, your wife and children and friends may say, "Why don't you try going to the bomoh? After all, you have gone to the doctor and have been told that you have got only three more months to live. Why don't you give the bomoh a try? There's nothing to lose". You might in turn think there is no harm in trying. But once you take that action, you are actually imparting to your children and relatives that you are taking the path that is against our religious teachings. My question is, how do you actually change this cultural belief so that we will become more rational and scientific?

Answer: This is the real problem. In your example, you mentioned about the person going to a bomoh after not succeeding with the doctor. At least he went to the doctor first, failing which he tried other things. But what happens if it was the other way round, that he

does not go the doctor at all but only does so when it is too late? We would prefer him not to waste so much money unnecessarily. In other words, there would be a second disappointment. There is already a first disappointment when the doctor did not succeed in helping him. Now, he will be in for a second disappointment. On the question of how to stop this practice, it is very difficult and takes time. The only way is by setting examples. Every head of the family must set an example. Secondly, it would be good, if it is possible, for instance, to have school teachers trained not to encourage this kind of beliefs amongst children. However, the teachers themselves must be convinced of this. It will be more effective if there are more teachers doing that. Some of these practices are harmless. Some are harmful to the individual as well as to others. For instance, there is a man who makes thousands a month practising some kind of faith healing. He has a "clinic" somewhere in Klang, where people come and are treated to *mandi bunga* (flower bath). They are also given medication and are charged a lot of money. What is most interesting is that those who go there are the wives of company directors and professionals. Therefore, this mentality has nothing to do with your education or your background. I have come across highly rational and intelligent drivers. They are sometimes much more advanced than some university professors in terms of outlook and thinking. They are not educated but they have the mentality. We are concerned with the mentality. If you are educated and become a professional but the historical overlapping is present in you, you will probably influence other people. I once had a visitor in my office in NUS in the early 1970s. This man had a problem. Apparently, his

problem was a lost brother. I asked him where his brother was lost. In all seriousness, he told me that his brother was lost in the Kallang River. I became curious. How can you get lost in the Kallang River where everybody can see you wherever you go? Apparently, he believed that he has a twin brother who was a crocodile. Although this is something which does not harm other people, I am sure it will harm him. He may be spending unnecessary time on the problem. I do not know whether he is sane. But then you will be very surprised that there are thousands of people who will believe him. If I were to take him to Rembau, Kuala Pulai and Seremban and meet the people there, thousands would believe him. This is rather harmless but when it comes to more serious types it can be very harmful. It can create hostility and enmity. For example, the moment you believe that a widower neighbour has cast a spell on your daughter because of jealousy, immediate hostile relation is established. This is one of the effects of such beliefs. It is very difficult to resolve and will normally linger on for years without resolution. It is also not possible for anybody to go to the neighbour and ask him why the girl has been charmed. On the other hand, the victim might go to a *bomoh* either to get rid of the charm or to hit back. Hostility develops. It will be a sensitive issue. Whoever visits the neighbour's house, even if they are friends, will be mistrusted. But it will also be difficult to tell friends not to visit the particular house because its owner has done such and such a thing to the daughter. So a whole web of hostility and suspicion is developed. It can be very dangerous and it breaks the harmony. The poor daughter will also live under the impression that a spell is being

cast upon her. She will worry whenever she has a flu, and will think of the neighbour and gets more frightened. A lot of things can happen. The only way to stop this is through more writings on the subject in the media. Unfortunately, many articles in the media would reinforce these ideas, particularly weeklies and small magazines. I think this should be a collective effort, like getting children to brush their teeth is a collective effort of parents. When you want to introduce certain habits of action or habits of thought, it has to be by the concerted effort of everybody. You cannot just make an announcement on the television telling people not to believe in superstition. Nobody would listen to you.

Question: Much have been said about who and what a "New Malay" should or should not be. In what way is the "New Malay" different from the "Old Malay" religiously?

Answer: I mentioned it at the beginning of my lecture that the "New Malay" should not have a limited, restrictive and narrow-minded concept of religion. But if you want to know what is meant by narrow-minded and the broad concept of religion, it will take another session. I can only give a summary statement.

Question: You were saying that the term the "New Malay" started to be used in late 70s and you were talking about it supposing to represent the personality of a new breed of Malays. My concern is that the term "New Malay" has been used quite a lot in the recent

years and it is something that most new generation of Malays strive to be. So what I am worried about is whether there is some misconception of what the "New Malay" is.

Answer: I think there is a great deal of misconception and one of the very striking examples of this misconception is that the very persons who claim to be the pioneering "New Malays" behave in the opposite way. For instance, there are many who claimed to be a "New Malay" but at the same time spent a lot of money to bring a *bomoh* during a drought. Some spent state money on that but the rain did not come. The term has been misused actually to mean the younger generation. There is a set of younger generation of politicians who call themselves "New" because they are younger to differentiate themselves from the older group. They use the term to mean generation. We are not concerned with generation but personality type. I came across a very interesting case of a rational and highly advanced person. He was a fish breeder in Bogor. He never went to school but his methods were completely advanced. Although he had no educational background, he used his reasoning power and applied it to his farming. He studied the behaviour of the fish and knew that certain types of fish need to be shaded and fed in a certain way. The only thing was this man was not equipped with modern knowledge. Had he gone to Hawaii and studied tropical agriculture and knew more about the chemistry of fertiliser, he would be better off. His mental set-up is the set-up of the "New Malay". There is another example from history where it is the mentality and not what the person does is involved. There was a very well-known Muslim writer on animal life by the name of Al Jahiz

several centuries ago. He was a curious phenomenon. He used to take a nap in the afternoon and to close the door of the room while doing so. He did this to prevent mosquitoes from coming in but yet he was bitten by them. Then he let the door half-open, the mosquitoes came in but he was not bitten and had a very good sleep. He became very interested in the problem. He applied his power of reasoning to find out why he could sleep well, undisturbed by mosquitoes when the door was half-open and the opposite when the door was closed. He discovered what scientists today call "biological control". He discovered that when the door was half-open, a lot of flies came in but when he closed the door, the flies could not come in and so the mosquitoes which were already there started biting him. He was not schooled anywhere, he did not attend university, but he applied his power of reasoning and analysis to the problem. A man like Al Jahiz has the mentality of the "New Man". In the modern world, there is, of course, a more comprehensive possibility of achieving this with the availability of more material and experience. But the basic factor, that is, your mindset, has to be there. If it is not there, no matter what you do, the thing will not take place.

Question: My question is also on the "New Malay". If you look across the Causeway, the "Melayu Baru" concept was hot during the UMNO General Assembly. With the concepts of "Melayu Baru", "UMNO Baru" and "Sabah Baru", one thing that came out of this was that there is a new breed of Malays called "Melayu Korporat". The "New Malay" has actually been referred to as "Melayu Korporat". What is your comment?

Answer: I think this is a misuse of the term. It is true that when they talk about "New Malay", some of them are thinking of "Melayu Korporat". Actually, this concept of "korporat" was introduced in 1971 by UMNO in a book called *Revolusi Mental*. I was a critic of that book in 1972. I was not concerned about "korporat". I was concerned about who is to blame. So I blamed the leadership in the wide sense of the word - the cultural and social leadership, because at that time, they were thinking in terms of developing a role model which is the "Melayu Korporat". The book considered people like John Paul Getty and Krupp from Germany as heroes. My reply was that the Germans would be shocked if they were to be told that Alfred Krupp was a hero and the Americans would be equally shocked if they were told that John Paul Getty was a hero. There is a difference between John Paul Getty and Abraham Lincoln or Thomas Jefferson. This idolisation of corporate figures has taken place and they use "Melayu Baru" to mean "Korporat". But that is not the meaning. The meaning of the term "Melayu Baru" is, if you have a cab driver who is very conscious of his car, who reasons out, applies mechanical knowledge and does not rely for the safety of his car on a *tangkal*, this is what we call "Melayu Baru" - one who applies his thinking. He does not have to be a corporate figure. On the other hand, you can have a lot of corporate figures who dress up nicely but actually possess overlapping historical periods. Even their neckties will frighten you. Everything frightens you including their brains.

Question : Towards the end of your presentation, you mentioned that the development of the "New Malay" is not new in comparison with what has happened in Europe and Russia. What are the things that we could learn from their experience in the process of trying to find out what the "New Malay" should be?

Answer: I am glad that the question is asked. There is similarity and dissimilarity. The similarity is the need to reverse and discover the New Man of your culture and tradition. The dissimilarity is the stage. We are not in the stage that has been gone through in Europe and Russia, that is, the stage of intense questioning and discussion. For instance, there was a lot of discussion on this problem in Europe and Russia. On the "New Malay", there is not such a discussion yet. When they read Islamic history, they did not focus their attention on this problem. In Russia and Europe, they went back to the past and started analysing people, trying to find out the different types of people in the past who represent the more developed kind. We have not gone into that. We have not analysed our *Sejarah Melayu* or *Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai*. We have not studied them in connection with this problem. But in the case of Europe, they have done that. The awakening process is much more vigorous. Sooner or later, we may come to that stage also. There is already a beginning as more and more postgraduate students are interested to take this up as a thesis theme and do more research on it. What I was trying to do was to get the writers to use this as a theme in their novels. The effort to bring about public awareness of this topic has not happened here as it had in Russia and Europe.



About The Association of Muslim Professionals

The Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP) is one of the five community self-help groups in Singapore. It was established in October 1991. AMP is granted the status of an Institution of Public Character and is registered as a charitable organisation.

Its mission is to play a leading role in the development and long term transformation of the Malay/Muslim community in Singapore into a dynamic community taking its pride of place in the larger Singaporean society. Since 1991, AMP has actively pursued community-based projects in the areas of education, social action, research and economic development.

The idea to form an organisation capable of accelerating the development of the Malay/Muslim community into the 21st century was discussed at the first ever National Convention of Malay/Muslim Professionals held in 1990. The proposal was unanimously endorsed and the establishment of the AMP was a key resolution of the Convention.

The Research Department's corporate objective is to promote research on issues and areas of interest affecting the Malay/Muslim community. Its basic function is to provide research support in the implementation of all AMP's community-based projects.

The AMP Seminar Series is an integral part of the activities organised by the Research Department. The Occasional Paper Series is a documentation of papers and research findings presented and discussed at the Seminar Series.

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