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Renaissance man

PERCEPTIVE: Royal Professor Ungku Aziz Ungku Abdul Hamid was passionate about addressing the incidence and vicious cycle of poverty

I KNEW about Ungku Aziz as a primary schoolgirl in Kampung Baru, Kuala Lumpur when my late father talked about meeting Ungku Aziz, and when one afternoon, he came home with what I saw an *orang puteh berjanggut*.

Later on, when I was an undergraduate, University Malaya welcomed him as its first Malaysian vice-chancellor.

As a second-year student at the Faculty of Rural Economics, of which Ungku Aziz was head, I was directly involved in running the students' cooperative, which he set up to provide a range of goods to the student population. This co-op was the precursor to the University Malaya co-op bookshop. And, both projects showed how Ungku Aziz deeply believed in the cooperative movement and its benefits.

I went through many years working with Ungku Aziz to "revive" the country's co-op movement, which had the image of *hidup segan mati tak mahu*, especially to reflect the state of affairs of co-ops in the rural areas. We attended weekly meetings with the then agriculture and cooperatives minister, the late Tun Ghafar Baba, to amend the very outdated cooperative law, and to revitalise the cooperative movement.

I was a member of the committee that established the Apex Cooperative Organisation (Angkasa), which was launched by the late Tun Abdul Razak Hussein. And, I was elected the vice-president, heading several times the Malaysian Co-op Movement delega-

tion to meetings of the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) all over the world when Ungku Aziz was unable to attend.

Of course, I would also be in his delegation as both the vice-president and later as head of the women's bureau of Angkasa.

At those ICA meetings, I was mistakenly taken to be, at different times, first, the delegation's interpreter and second, its secretary and to Ungku Aziz's amusement, his daughter (because of my name! And, I was in my late 20s then!)

Very early on as an undergrad, I could see and feel how committed and passionate Ungku Aziz is about the incidence and the vicious cycle of poverty, particularly rural poverty. He felt strongly of the need to eradicate exploitative middlemen and the *padi kunca* system.

We went to Tanjung Karang and Sabak Bernam during the long vacation to undertake a survey of the padi farmers there. And, Ungku brought along (his wife), the late Kak Azah, whom I got to know well after that. And, once, (his daughter) Zeti came, too.

Ungku Aziz is very perceptive and has a strong analytical trait. I remember one day he asked a group of lecturers, including myself, to do a project to analyse the mood and feelings underlying Malay songs in that era. He wanted to show that the Malay songs were melancholic, reflected hopelessness and even morbidity... and he was right!

The songs showed the Malays at that time as a community that was generally synonymous with poverty and always despondent.

Ungku Aziz does not only talk about problems, such as the

problems plaguing the Malay community. He always set about to find the solutions.

Thus, he proposed to the government to set up Tabung Haji, which enables Muslims to save for their pilgrimage in a syariah-compliant savings and investment organisation. This was to eradicate

the practice among many Muslims at the time of selling off all their assets and property to perform the haj. And, only to return as *haji*, but with no means of livelihood and having to *pajak* or lease plots of land from exploitative landlords, who practised the *padi kunca* system.

Ungku Aziz certainly has no qualms about calling a spade a spade, although he does it in a polite way. And, under his watch, University Malaya flourished. He appointed me to the university senate (at the same time, Tun Razak had also appointed me to the parliamentary senate... so I actually was a member of two senates!).

The students had access to Ungku Aziz, so did staff members. There was no protocol when working with him. It made life easy for us.

Travelling with him was a breeze. He had jokes to tell. We rode the public transport in Paris.

At the personal level, Ungku Aziz was a mentor to me. And, he and Kak Azah were the main guests at my wedding.

My husband asked me to seek Ungku Aziz's advice when then prime minister Tun Hussein Onn phoned me at home in 1976 to tell me he was bringing me into the government.

It meant I had to resign from the university within 24 hours if I ac-

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cepted the job. I called Ungku Aziz and the outcome of our conversation was that, later in the evening, I returned the prime minister's call to thank him and say that I accept the government post.

My university colleagues and I always have a high regard for Ungku Aziz, who often shared his health "secrets" with us. Apart from daily walks (those days along the very lonely Damansara estate roads that wound for miles!), Ungku also took fresh onions. And, of course, only healthy foods.

His advice fell on deaf ears as far as I was concerned. I hardly went for walks and only have onions when the thin slices are buried under some cholesterol-rich sauce or dressing!

It is not easy to emulate the ever spritely and youthful Ungku Aziz, who belies his years!

Happy birthday, Ungku, and wishing you many more healthy and happy years!



Tan Sri Rafidah Aziz is former international trade and industry minister



Royal Professor Ungku Aziz Ungku Abdul Hamid (with hailer) trying to calm students at the lobby of Dewan Tunku Chancellor in University Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, after riot police dispersed them with tear gas on Aug 28, 1969.

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'His advice is to always stay true to values'

FOND DAYS: Tan Sri Dr Zeti Akhtar Aziz remembers her father, Royal Professor Ungku Aziz, as a disciplinarian with a sense of humour when she was growing up. She shares some insights about him in conjunction with his 92nd birthday

QUESTION: As a daughter, what is your personal view of your father, Royal Professor Ungku Aziz, who has contributed greatly to the country, especially in the establishment of Tabung Haji and Angkasa, as well as in raising the social standing of the Malays?

Answer: His mind. He has a great mind. He developed thinking on a wide range of subject matters. While his contributions are many, he devoted his entire life to contributing in making a difference in two main areas. He developed thinking on issues relating to poverty and economic development. His work in this area started in the 1950s. It drew attention to the need for addressing poverty and economic development. In the area of education, he was with University Malaya for 40 years, of which for more than 20 years, he continued to educate whilst managing the university as the vice-chancellor. It produced the graduates that have contributed to managing Malaysia's golden years. He contributed in making a major difference.

Question: Can you share with us how you were raised? Was he strict or someone with strong sense of humour?

Answer: My father always encouraged me to read. He would always give me books throughout my life. He was also strict about time management for different activities during the day, especially in allocating time for meals and time for studying and time to have sufficient sleep. His own life is highly disciplined. He is usually calm and very rarely loses his temper. To this day, he is highly astute and has a great sense of humour.

Question: Did he play an important role and have strong influence in your career and accomplishments?

Answer: My father encouraged me to gain knowledge and become highly authoritative on the subject that was of interest to me. He never tried to make me follow a specific career path. His approach was to best prepare me so that I would make the right choices. He did, however, have me study mathematics all the way to the university because he said whatever was my chosen field, mathematics would be important.

Question: Can you describe any memorable moments with Royal Professor Ungku Aziz?

Answer: There were different mo-

ments in both our lives, which were turning points, some of which had significant effect on us.

We spent time discussing these developments. We very much valued each other's thinking on these occasions. I will always remember these times.

Question: Is there any word of advice from your father that you remember and uphold until today?

Answer: Fortify oneself with accumulation of knowledge. Develop thinking skills. Always

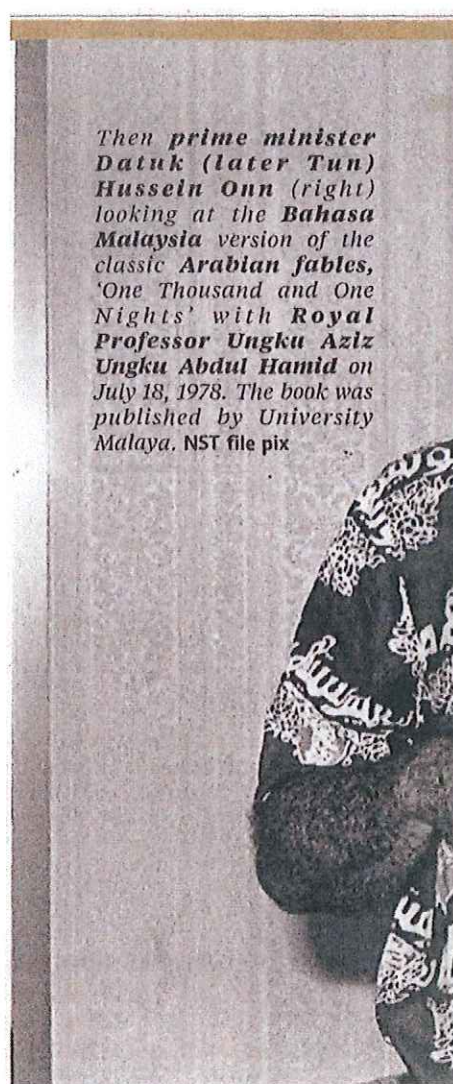
aim to excel and not be distracted by the need to accumulate wealth or power.

Always stay true to the important values.



Tan Sri Dr Zeti Akhtar Aziz
is governor of Bank Negara Malaysia

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Guests, including Royal Professor Ungku Aziz Ungku Abdul Hamid (right), greeting Yang di-Pertuan Agong Tuanku Abdul Halim Mu'adzam Shah (left) at the royal tea party in conjunction with the king's birthday, on June 7, 1972.