

ULASAN BUKU/BOOK REVIEW

Malaysian Studies: Looking Back, Moving Forward, by Abdul Rahman Embong, Kajang: Persatuan Sains Sosial Malaysia, 2010, 210 pp.

This book is essentially a compilation of speeches, public statements, press statements, essays and interviews related to the immediate past president of the Malaysian Social Science Association (MSSA, established on 14 September 1978), Professor Abdul Rahman Embong. But more than that, this book provides an insight into the history of social sciences in general and the MSSA in particular via author Rahman Embong's writings.

Readers are also told of the academic significance of the International Malaysian Studies Conferences (MSC), started since 1997, "that provides the platform for Malaysian scholars and Malaysianists to share their research findings and thoughts on various aspects of Malaysian society and to build networking and collaboration. (p. xvi)" But, equally important, this is also the arena where keynote addresses of the MSSA president were made, the kind of speeches that were significant enough for the conference participants and the book reader to chew on.

The presidential addresses in these MSCs provide a platform for the MSSA president (in this case, Prof. Abdul Rahman Embong) to articulate his concerns – on behalf of his fellow academics – about social sciences in particular and the academia in Malaysia in general. For instance, in his speech at the 6th MSC in August 2008, he identified five important concerns: Firstly, he reminded fellow academics in Malaysia of the importance of upholding standards and principles, and this involved putting heavy emphasis on "the quality of teaching, research, publications and public discourses as well as ethics and public responsibility" (p. 25). In this regard, it is pertinent to also echo his worry that in an academic environment where most universities' obsession is with ranking and key performance indicators (KPIs), one must be aware of the dangers of number-crunching and compromising of quality in the fervour for quantity.

Secondly, Rahman Embong reminded the academic community of the relevance and significance of idealism and passion for scholarship, apart from being 'independent-minded, analytical' and articulate in their collective role as public intellectuals and thinkers.

Thirdly, Malaysian academics should not sever their ties with their own scholarly tradition, mindful of the immense intellectual contribution of the

scholars of yore, such as the late Professors Syed Hussein Alatas and Ishak Shaari.

Fourthly, Rahman highlighted the importance of inclusivity in Malaysia's social sciences in that it should embrace ethnic diversity and diverse geographical regions in the country, in particular the attempt to close the gap between academics in the Peninsula and Sabah and Sarawak. This effort is important as peoples from these two regions have a lot to learn from each other. This in turn led to, fifthly, the call for the proper bridging of Malaysian Studies and Borneo Studies.

In fact, in this regard Rahman even further suggested in his presidential speech on 16 March 2010, that Malaysian Studies should be subsumed under the larger rubric of Asian Studies especially with the development of interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches. While there is virtue in confining a study within a narrow scope for reason of manageability, there is also a risk of falling into the trap of academic parochialism, warned Rahman.

Another equally important problem of research that he raised was analytical in nature. He cautioned Malaysian researchers not to be too obsessed with proving the validity of the research instrument used, but instead explain 'the sociology, anthropology, psychology, politics or economics of the topic under study' (p.34). Often, he added, some researchers are overwhelmed by statistics and data to the point where they neglect the need to highlight 'the deeper meaning behind them' (p. 34), i.e. the social significance of it all.

Rahman also called on Malaysian social scientists, particularly the senior ones, to move to a higher level of theorising as he felt that this is a crucial move to broaden the frontiers of knowledge in Malaysian Studies.

In Chapter 9, readers are given the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the Malaysian Social Science Association (MSSA) particularly its contribution towards a deeper understanding of social and ethnic diversity in Malaysia. This is achieved by, among other things, promoting a sense of multiethnic Malaysian community and solidarity of social scientists as well as de-ethnicising issues and debates through their research and analyses. Secondly, MSSA makes a conscious effort to promote its membership that is multiethnic. Thirdly, the association also encourages public advocacy by having a connection between research and policy so as to influence policy makers in a way that could contribute to better interethnic understanding and improved ethnic relations. In a contemporary Malaysia where ethnicity has increasingly become a game many politicians and also, to a limited extent, a few pseudo-academics play and exploit, an academic

contribution from the social science community is most urgent and needed to help de-ethnicise issues and social problems.

In the same chapter, Rahman also expressed his deep concern for the continuity of active and able leadership of the MSSA. He reminded us all of the responsibility of young social science scholars to take over the leadership of the present one so that the association would continue to be strong and make vital contributions to the academic community in particular and the society in general. Needless to say, passing on the baton is as vital as doing quality, critical and socially relevant research.

Chapter 15, titled "Research in the Social Sciences and Humanities in Malaysia: A Historical Overview", is one of the important and interesting chapters in the book, particularly for young scholars as well as interested members of the general public. At the very outset, Rahman emphasised the importance of an intellectual and political environment that promotes 'innovation, critical thinking and a free flow of ideas. (p. 90)" This kind of environment is crucial indeed to enable the community of scholars to work freely among themselves and also collaborate with the government and industry in the endeavour to generate knowledge and apply it for the common good of society. It is a pertinent remark made by Rahman given the constricting nature of the political culture of the larger social context in Malaysia.

In a chapter (like this one) that examines the history of research in Malaysia's social sciences and humanities, Rahman rightly pointed out the importance of examining the intellectual and social history in Malaysia so that scholars would be able to assess what had been done in terms of research and subsequently move forward from there. Equally important, researchers need to realise that their work cannot and should not be a-historical in their scholarly endeavour to understand better the social phenomenon they are investigating. It is in this context that Rahman cautioned local researchers of the pitfalls of 'romancing' with positivism.

As intimated at the outset of this chapter, Rahman traced the development of research on Malayan (and subsequently, Malaysian) society since the late 19th century of the colonial era until today. Some important works were mentioned particularly those conducted by local researchers that helped build local knowledge, the significance of which has been felt nationally and, in certain works, internationally, such as Syed Husin Ali's *Social Stratification in Kampung Bagan* (1964), Syed Hussein Alatas's *The Myth of the Lazy Native* (1977), Jomo K.S.'s *A Question of Class: Capital, the State and Uneven Development in Malaya* (1986), Francis Loh & Khoo Boo Teik's *Democracy in Malaysia: Discourses and Politics* (ed. 2002), Abdul Rahman Embong's *State-led*

Modernization and the New Middle Class in Malaysia (2002), and Cecilia Ng & Rashidah Shuib's *A Profile of Women's and Gender Studies* (ed. 2009) to name a few.

Indeed, research in social sciences and humanities has certainly come a long way – from the disciplines of economics, anthropology, sociology, history, education, psychology, political science, geography and law to the field of communications, language and literature, and religion namely Islam.

There is also a section where public statements were made in the name of the MSSA, indicative of the social relevance of the association. Put another way, the MSSA as a community of scholars had issued statements of academic, political, economic and cultural import to the general public on issues of the day, such as statements made on Malaysia's 12th general elections in 2008, the much reported and discussed death of Teoh Beng Hock, and the political situation in the aftermath of the 2008 general elections.

If there is a weakness to this volume, it is the repetitiveness of certain things expressed by the author as is found in the collection of speeches made by Rahman as president of the MSSA. For instance, the challenges to Malaysia's social science and the MSSA exist in some of the speeches in varying degrees.

That said, this book makes a compelling read for scholars of Malaysia, Malaysianists, students and interested members of the general public.

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