

**Ungku Abdul Aziz  
bin Ungku Abdul Hamid (1922–2020):  
The Thinking and Worldview of an  
Illustrious Malaysian Muslim\***

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**Abstract**

This article seeks to examine the worldview of al-marhūm Royal Professor Ungku Abdul Aziz bin Ungku Abdul Hamid of Malaysia (1922–2020) as reflected in his scholarship and intellectual journey, which would be instructive in giving more insight into the mind of a learned Muslim in the context of a post-colonial Muslim nation. To gain a clearer idea of how Ungku Aziz's mind was shaped and to better understand his thought process, this article examines the discussions, sources, and influences that left impressions on him, and how he focused his mind throughout his life in chronological order. The methodology adopted for this purpose is primarily a creative use of the archival or documentary research method which involves analysing the usage

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of key terms by the subject related to the question of “worldview” or “thinking framework,” “belief,” “thought,” and the “mind” in selected documents and records. In addition, verbal statements of relevant information were also utilised to furnish certain details. Finally, this article argues that while there are areas of Ungku Aziz’s discussions and statements which could be more informed by insights from the intellectual tradition of Islam, Ungku Aziz generally held a more nuanced and learned view of Islam as a religion and civilisation—different from many other economists or Muslim Western-trained academics of his time.

**Keywords**

Ungku Aziz, worldview, belief, thought, the mind, and secularisation.

**Introduction**

“Setiap manusia perlu menggunakan kemahiran berfikir mereka kerana itulah anugerah Tuhan paling bermakna (Every human being must utilise their thinking capacity, for that is God’s most meaningful gift).”<sup>1</sup>

—Royal Professor Ungku Abdul Aziz

Ungku Abdul Aziz bin Ungku Abdul Hamid—henceforth Ungku Aziz—was one of the most celebrated and recognisable figures in 20th century Malaysia, and generally regarded as a “thinker” and a distinguished intellectual by the Malaysian public. Having lived in a period that is marked by intense contact with Western thought and scholarship due to British imperialism, the introduction of a Western-style education system, the rise of the English language as the language of scholarship, the severance of consciousness of Islam as a worldview and civilisation among the intelligentsia, and by extension, secularisation in the intellectual sense, by the

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1. Hafizahril Hamid dan Khairunnisa Sulaiman, “Tips sihat Prof Ungku Aziz,” *Mingguan Malaysia*, 19<sup>th</sup> February 2012.

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time of Ungku Aziz's childhood, the traditional education of Islam via the *madrasah* system is no longer the only option, with the English school system as another option. While there is no doubt that Ungku Aziz was known as a Muslim throughout his life, his explicit stand and views on Islam and its metaphysical premises are generally not as widely known. This is likely due to several reasons: the fact that Ungku Aziz was associated more as an economist, an expert of higher education, and a social analyst of sorts, rather than someone sought on the matters of religion. It is also known that he tends to shy away from media queries on such matters. Be that as it may, one can find that Ungku Aziz's understanding of Islam is not merely emotional or cultural, but intellectual, spiritual, and civilisational.

This article finds that as Ungku Aziz grew older, it appears that he is more conscious of God in his reasoning and more inclined to the worldview of Islam in particular. This can be discerned in his statements, such as the one quoted above, which is one of those rare occasions in which he was explicit about his metaphysical commitments. Having said that, this article also argues that certain lines of thinking and arguments by Ungku Aziz can be refined further by drawing insights from the intellectual tradition of Islam and scholars more conversant on matters which Ungku Aziz himself was proposing—notwithstanding the generally thoughtful propositions and ideas Ungku Aziz has put forth on a range of subjects. The purpose of this article is not to cherry pick and find faults with Ungku Aziz's mind and thinking, rather to intelligently benefit from his insights, to do justice to him, as well as to reflect on some of his more questionable assumptions and premises.

The methodology adopted for this article is primarily a creative use of the documentary research method which involves analysing the usage of key terms by the subject related to the question of “worldview” or “thinking framework,” “belief,” “thought,” and the “mind” in selected documents. These documents are chiefly relevant newspaper cuttings, magazines, official documents, photographs, books, and articles. To interpret the meaning deployed in these documents, careful attention

will be given to the context in a chronological structure, as well as the key concepts or the intended semantic field which will enable us to determine the subject's worldview or thinking framework more accurately. In addition, verbal statements of relevant information were also utilised to furnish certain details.

### **The Formation and Sources of Ungku Aziz's Thoughts**

A person's mind, thought, or worldview<sup>2</sup> is not necessarily determined only by the books or texts he reads, or ideas which left an impression on him. Rather, it is through the key concepts and expressions more dominant in his mind, in the case of Ungku Aziz, the Malay language, which remains heavily laden with key concepts and expressions of Islam. While Ungku Aziz may be exposed to spoken and written English a great deal due to his father and aristocratic family of 20th century Malaya, there was generally an affirmation of Islam in their expressions and the meanings they intend to convey as can be seen in his intellectual journey.

Ungku Abdul Aziz was born in London, England on 28th January 1922.<sup>3</sup> His father, Ungku Abdul Hamid bin Ungku Abdul Majid<sup>4</sup> read law at the University of Cambridge, England—

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2. By "worldview" I do not mean merely a person's view of the world. Rather, I mean by it in the deeper sense i.e., the vision of reality and truth that appears before our mind's eye—which for most civilisations, encompasses the material reality and also the immaterial reality. The "worldview" is, in other words, how a person understands and perceives "reality." For an exposition on the worldview of Islam, see Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam: An Exposition on the Fundamental Elements of the Worldview of Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1995), 1–39.
  3. For more details of his personal, academic, and professional background, see Hashim Yaacob et. al, *The Renaissance Man* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press: 2010), *Ungku Abdul Aziz: Berjasa dan Berbakti kepada Negara* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Library, 1988); and Aziz Zariza Ahmad, *Sebutir Permata di Menara* (Petaling Jaya: International Book Service, 1982).
  4. He is the son of Ungku Abdul Majid Ibni Temenggong Daeng Ibrahim (d. 1889), the brother of Sultan Abu Bakar of Johor, who was married to a Turkish woman named Ruqayyah Hanim (d. 1904). See Dzireena Mahadzir, "Taking root, branching out," *The Star on the Web*, 1st April 2007.

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perhaps one of the earliest Malays to study at Cambridge University—and is said to have known Arabic, Persian, French, Latin, and Sanskrit.<sup>5</sup> Ungku Aziz’s mother, Hamidah Binti Abdullah,<sup>6</sup> was an Armenian-English descent who died when Ungku Aziz was two years old leaving him in the care of his father and his maternal grandmother during childhood up to teenage years.<sup>7</sup>

The passing of Ungku Aziz’s mother dearly affected the psychological state of his father in the months that followed, which in turn led to a spiritual awakening as he deepened his knowledge of Islam and specifically in the science of *taṣawwuf*.<sup>8</sup>

5. Saim Kayadibi (ed.), *Ottoman Connections to the Malay World: Islam, Law, and Society* (Kuala Lumpur: The Other Press, 2011) and Aziz Zariza Ahmad, *Sebutir Permata*, 2.
6. She had met Ungku Abdul Hamid circa 1919 while the latter was living in Hamstead Heath, London. It is suspected that her parents are of Armenian nobles or cultural elite who fled the Ottoman State during the first decade of the 20th century due to political tension between the Armenian community and the Ottomans.
7. She passed away 5 years into their marriage due to pneumonia during a working trip in Edinburgh and was later buried in Woking’s Muslim Burial Ground. News of her passing was published in London’s *Islamic Review* (April–May issue): “We greatly regret to announce the death of Hamidah, the beloved wife of Ungku A. Hamid, of Johore, who passed away peacefully on the 16th of February 1924, leaving an infant son aged two years. Of her acts of charity, numerous and far-reaching, it is not for us to speak here; to her simple and earnest faith those who knew her best will testify. Her loss is deeply mourned by her husband, her relatives, her friends, and all who knew her. Beloved in life, in death she will ever be remembered for her selflessness, her unflinching kindness and her boundless generosity.” See Al-Haj Khwaja Kamal-Ud-Din (ed.), *The Islamic Review XII* (Woking: The Mosque, April–May 1924), 132, <http://www.wokingmuslim.org/work/islamic-review/1924/apr-may24.pdf>.
8. A technical term denoting the inner or spiritual dimension of Islam which includes theoretical discussions on metaphysics, and practical discussions on purification of the soul and cultivation of inner and external virtues. The known writings on Islam subject in English which may have come to Ungku Abdul Hamid’s attention at the time includes Sir Thomas Walker Arnold’s *The Preaching of Islam: A History of the Propagation of the Muslim Faith* (1896), Reynold A. Nicholson’s translation of *The Kashf al-Mahjūb: The Oldest Persian Treatise on Sūfism by ‘Alī ibn ‘Uthmān al-Jullābī al-Hujwīrī* (Leiden: Brill, 1911), *The Mystics of Islam* (Oxford: G. Bell & Sons Ltd, 1914), and the famous pamphlet by Abdullah Quilliam, the Shaykh al-Islam of British Isles, titled *The Faith of Islam* (Liverpool: T.Dobb & Co., General Printers, 1889).

Upon the persuasion of Ungku Abdul Hamid's brother (also named Ungku Abdul Aziz) who personally travelled to London, Ungku Abdul Hamid returned to Johor Sultanate, serving as a state administrator and eventually working as the Chief Translator of the Sultanate's Translations Bureau.

Ungku Aziz's father was known as a man of piety (*wara*) towards the end of his life, who made sure his child received basic religious education (*fard 'ayn*) and showered affection on his only child. His father attempted to send him to an Arab school under the tutelage of one Syed Isa al-Habshi, but it only lasted for three weeks. Subsequently, his father hired a private tutor to teach him Islam and the recitation of the Qur'an. On his deathbed, he reminded his son—who was then 17 years old—to hold on to his prayers and perform the worship as required by Islam. His last words to his son were: "You will be alright. God will take care of you."<sup>9</sup>

Although Ungku Aziz recounted that his father rarely gave direct life advice, his father indirectly inculcated in him a love for knowledge, as well as the spirit to study hard, to grow up and live as a good Muslim.<sup>10</sup> It was perhaps during his childhood experience growing up in Batu Pahat that he first encountered the conditions and hardships of rural living that could have affected his intellectual orientation later as an economist with much concerns about rural poverty. At the same time, his father used to surround Ungku Aziz with many books, and took him for trips to European countries, while also imparting to him the habit of savings.<sup>11</sup>

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9. Asmah Haji Omar, *Riwayat Ungku Aziz* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 2014), 90.

10. "Arwah ayah tidak banyak mempengaruhi saya, tidak banyak meninggalkan nasihat. Dia hidup dalam dunianya sendiri tetapi dari semasa ke semasa kami berbincang juga. Dia banyak meninggalkan saya dengan dunia saya sendiri. Tetapi ada satu perkara yang dia tekankan: Kalau tidak berjaya dalam pelajaran kamu tidak akan jadi sesiapa. Dia nasihatkan bahawa dalam apa keadaan saya mesti belajar kerana kejayaan itu datang daripada usaha kita belajar." Ungku Aziz Interview, Noor Azam Shairi, "Hidup bukan *Que Sera, Sera*," *Utusan Malaysia*, 15th May 2005; see also Aziz Zariza, *Sebutir Permata*, 2.

11. *Ibid.*

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The general atmosphere in Johor when Ungku Aziz was brought up must have been most conducive to his intellectual growth. Despite the loss of his mother at a young age, Ungku Aziz was blessed with many learned extended family members apart from his father. Indeed, after the demise of his father, two of his uncles looked after him: there was his uncle also named Ungku Abdul Aziz (bin Ungku Abdul Majid) who was the sixth Chief Minister of Johore and had in his possession a rich collection of books and Islamic manuscripts. Thus, even by the age of 15 years old, Ungku Aziz recounted that he used to read one book a week on average.<sup>12</sup>

Another erudite family member who took care of him was his uncle, Dato' Onn bin Jaafar<sup>13</sup> (d. 1962), a highly esteemed public figure in the Malay community at that time who was instrumental in unifying and mobilising the Malays against British rule.<sup>14</sup> It was to Dato' Onn that Ungku Aziz first declared that he wanted to be an economist, instead of attending military college or working in the civil service whose pathways Dato' Onn offered. He realised that economics is an important area of knowledge that not many people know. Perhaps it was Dato Onn's discourses about the challenges of the population, the economy, and the poverty of the Malays during British rule that had ignited some of these realisations.<sup>15</sup>

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12. Tan Gim Ean, "The Literary-Minded Professor," *New Sunday Times*, 22nd September 1991.
  13. By virtue of Rogaya Hanum's third marriage to Datuk Jaafar Muhammad. For an excellent sketch of Dato Onn's role in the history of the Malays, see Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas' account in Mohamed Abid's *Reflections of Pre-Independence Malaya* (Kuala Lumpur: Pelanduk Publications, 2003), 74.
  14. Dato' Onn's father himself believed that his children should not only be well educated, but they should also be cultured and enlightened. They must read the Malay *hikayat* and *syair* and English literature and poetry; they must play musical instruments and enjoy music, read the Qur'an and understand religion, and have good taste in food and clothes. It was also reported that even as a child, Dato' Onn were among the most voracious readers at home; as teenagers, they had read all the Malay manuscripts in their household library. See Zainah Anwar, *Legacy of Honor* (Kuala Lumpur: Yayasan Mohamed Noah, 2011), 58.
  15. Although the writings of Dato' Onn are not published, the general content of his writings were mentioned in biographical works such as

A further important life and educational phase for Ungku Aziz was his exposure to Japanese thought and culture which was intensified during his time in Japan as a 21-year-old student and later, as a 40-year-old PhD candidate. This phase began during the World War II in Johore, when Ungku Aziz became acquainted with a learned Japanese administrative officer named Y. Tokugawa who was a descendent of the Tokugawa family that once ruled Japan from the early 16th century to the 19th century, and who had studied at Oxford University. It was during the Japanese rule in Malaya also that Ungku Aziz studied the Japanese language at a school in Singapore. Then by January 1943, through the facilitation of Y. Tokugawa and with the permission of his family, Ungku Aziz departed for Japan by ship with 24 other Malays who were also offered scholarships but Ungku Aziz alone was offered to study at Waseda University.

For the next nine months in 1943, Ungku Aziz received private tutoring in the Japanese language, mathematics and economics in order to prepare him to sit for the entrance examination at Waseda University.<sup>16</sup> In the remaining years up to 1945, Ungku Aziz not only immersed himself in the formal education at Waseda University but also informal education through his self-study on the *Samurai* philosophy as well as readings of the great literatures he had access to in the university's library and second-hand bookshops. It is probable that Ungku Aziz lived in a residence of Y. Tokugawa during this period.<sup>17</sup>

His experience of living and studying in Japan from 1942 to 1945 appeared to have left an impression on him. In Japan, Ungku Aziz had access to the works of a number of Russian

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Fadzil Abdullah, Kassim Thukiman, and Md. Zin Idros, *Om̄ Jaafar: Pejuang Terbilang Pengasas Sebuah Negara Bangsa* (Petaling Jaya: MPH Group Publishing, 2007).

16. Asmah, *Riwayat Ungku Aziz*, 107.

17. According to a verbal recollection by Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, he was received by Y. Tokugawa in Japan upon Ungku Aziz's communication with the latter, in his transit to Canada on a ship. Al-Attas recalls that Y. Tokugawa brought him to his residence where Ungku Aziz had also stayed.



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and Western literary, social, and political thinkers which he recalled reading. These thinkers include, for example, Dostoevsky (d. 1881), Anton Chekhov (d. 1904), Nicolas Machiavelli (d. 1527), and Karl Marx (d. 1883). He also had access to works of the Eastern sages such as Confucius (d. 470 BC) whom Ungku Aziz often quoted in his later years. The exposure to the abovementioned renowned authors must have broadened his horizons on the rich diversity of worldviews of other civilisations.

In an interview with the *New Straits Times* in 2002, he recollected during his time in Japan, saying that “the library was excellent and there were lots of secondhand bookstores that sold volumes on everything from law to languages. I read Machiavelli, Anton Chekhov, and Dostoevsky.” He particularly admired the Japanese experience of being able to hold up against the West during “the closing of Japan” (the Edo period) and the way they “absorbed knowledge from the West and made it their own”<sup>18</sup> in its endeavour to rebuild and develop after World War II.<sup>19</sup> However, this exposure was cut short due to World War II, which forced him to return to Malaya by 1945. He recollected that it was a miraculous journey home from Japan—the Tokugawa family had helped put him on a train to a port where he boarded a Red Cross boat in the midst of bombs that were shelling in the area.<sup>20</sup>

In 1946, Ungku Aziz married his childhood sweetheart, Sharifah Azah binti Syed Mohammad Alsagoff,<sup>21</sup> who would

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18. From the time of Japan’s opening in 1854 its state policy was that Japan is to adopt foreign knowledge and, as the slogan *wakon yōsai* (Japanese spirit, Western learning, or technology) proclaimed, imbue it with the Japanese soul. For further reading on *wakon yōsai*, see for example, R. Sakamoto, “Confucianising Science: Sakuma Shōzan and *Wakon Yōsai* Ideology,” *Japanese Studies* 28, no. 2 (2008): 213–226. See also Michio Morishima, *Why Has Japan ‘Succeeded’?: Western Technology and the Japanese Ethos* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

19. Shareem Amry, “Irrepressible Pak Ungku,” *New Straits Times*, 28th January 2002.

20. This fact was conveyed by his daughter, Tan Sri Zeti Akhtar Aziz, in her tribute to her father on 9th March 2021 during an event to pay tribute to her father, organised by the University of Malaya.

21. See Sandra Low, “Cultural Icon,” *The Star*, 18th July 2012.

later become a leading cultural icon of Malaysia. For a brief period, Ungku Aziz worked in the Johor civil service during the British colonial rule in the 1940s as a Labour Exchange Officer. Then, he became the Secretary at the Secretary Office of the Johor State Government.

Subsequently, he resumed his studies at Raffles College, Singapore in the fields of economics, history, and English literature for his diploma at the Raffles College in Singapore. Three years of studying there exposed him to the great works of literature of the West such as Shakespeare (he re-read *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* the most), Hemingway, and a number of short stories. The idea of “courage” contained in these literatures captured his attention the most. He also discovered *The Meaning of Meanings* by C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards, which is a study on the influence of language on thought and the science of symbolism. The work left an impression on him on how the use of language determines how one thinks. On the subject of economics he was taught by, among others, Professor Thomas Silcock<sup>22</sup>—an authority on Malaya’s economy at the time—and studied alongside the likes of the third Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tun Abdul Razak (d. 1976), the Kuok Brothers (who went on to become the richest family in Malaysia for decades), and the first Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew (d.

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22. He was educated at University College London and Oxford University, receiving a firm grounding in classics but eventually specialising in economics. After several academic appointments, he became Professor of Economics at Raffles College, Singapore. During World War II, he was imprisoned with other university teachers at Changi and worked on the Burma-Thai railway. After the war, Silcock continued his academic career in University of Malaya and the United Kingdom before taking up a Fellowship at the Australian National University. He is said to be committed to the Hicksian worldview of The Social Framework. His publications include *A History of Economic Teaching and Graduates in Singapore* (Singapore: National University of Singapore, 1985); *Dilemma in Malaya* (London: Fabian Publications and Gollancz, 1949); *Nationalism in Malaya* (New York: International Secretariat, Institute of Pacific Relations, 1950); *The Economy of Malaya: An Essay in Colonial Political Economy* (Singapore: D. Moore, 1955); *Readings in Malayan Economics* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 1961) and *Towards a Malayan Nation* (Singapore: Donald Moore for Eastern Universities Press Ltd., 1961).

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2015). Then, he pursued his undergraduate degree for only a year at the University of Malaya, where he earned a First Class Honours in 1951. In August 1952, a year after his graduation, he was appointed as a full-time lecturer in economics at the same university.

It was during this time that he, then aged 34, together with Za'ba, who was then 60 years old, became the primary activists to establish the Federation of Malay Language of University Malaya (*Persekutuan Bahasa Melayu Universiti Malaya* or *PBMUM*) on 29th January 1955—an influential group in Malaya that advocated Malay as the national language. He and Za'ba as representatives of PBMUM prepared a paperwork at the Malay Literature and Language Congress (*Kongres Bahasa dan Persuratan Melayu Malaya*) entitled *Laporan Tentang Bahasa Melayu dan Bahasa Indonesia* (Report on the Malay Language and Indonesian Language).<sup>23</sup> His interactions with Za'ba during this period then led to lasting impressions. Ungku Aziz subsequently paid tribute to Za'ba in *Footprints on the Sands of Time: The Malaya Poverty Concept Over 50 Years from Za'ba to Aziz and the Second Malaysia Plan*,<sup>24</sup> and *Jejak-Jejak di Pantai Zaman*,<sup>25</sup> and often recommended the Malays to read Za'ba's *Perangai Bergantung kepada Diri Sendiri* (The Habit of Self-Reliance)<sup>26</sup>.

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23. Abdullah Hussain (ed.), *Memoranda Kumpulan Tulisan Angkatan Sasterawan 50 dengan Lampiran Kongres Bahasa dan Persuratan Melayu Ketiga* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1962).

24. Ungku A. Aziz Abdul Hamid, *Footprints on the Sands of Time: The Malaya Poverty Concept Over 50 Years from Za'ba to Aziz and the Second Malaysia Plan* (Kuala Lumpur: Persatuan Ekonomi Malaysia, 1974).

25. Ungku A. Aziz, *Jejak-Jejak di Pantai Zaman* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1987).

26. In a 2005 interview with a newspaper, Ungku Aziz said, “*Secara ringkas, apa yang dikatakan oleh Za'ba dalam bukunya itu ialah kalau ada keyakinan kita boleh melakukan apa saja. Kita boleh menjadi unggul tetapi usaha itu bergantung kepada diri kita sendiri. Malah apa yang disebut oleh Za'ba itu adalah falsafah yang digali daripada ajaran al-Qur'an.*” (“In brief, what is being said by Za'ba in this book of his is that if we have confidence, we can do anything. We can be excellent but the effort depends on ourselves. In fact, what is mentioned by Za'ba is derived from the Qur'an.”). See Noor Azam Shairi, “Hidup bukan *Que Sera, Sera*.”

His first professional involvement in the international arena was in October 1958 when the United Nations appointed him, at the age of 36, to teach at the Food and Agriculture Organisation's (FAO) Land Settlement Training Centre in Ceylon for a 3-week course. In the following year, he completed and submitted the famous Muslim Pilgrims Improvement Plan which led to the founding of Tabung Haji by the Government of Malaysia. It is worthy of note that Ungku Aziz was able to achieve this whilst being only a lecturer, not yet with a PhD.

In 1960, he was appointed as a Senior Lecturer and Head of the Department of Economics at the University of Malaya and another UN appointment came shortly after, this time as a member of the permanent committee for agriculture of the ILO for a 3-year term. By 1961, still at a relatively young age of 39 years old, it was already observable that his mind was not easily impressed by ideas from abroad if they did not contribute to solving the problems of his own people. For instance, in his article titled *Prospects for Economic Growth in Asia* written in the same year, Ungku Aziz saw the need to re-orientate the thinking of local intellectuals. He remarked:

Many of them are products of education abroad—and indeed it is a very fine thing to leave Malaya and go to London. One finds wonderful theatres and concerts and very charming English girls who are so friendly. Our students sit in England and worry about the problems of the Common Market in Europe and join the protests about Africa until finally they graduate, and their government says they had better come back home. Reluctantly they return, their only consolation being the prospect of a good job which the government obligingly provides. Then the nostalgia begins. They look back on the days when they could go to the Albert Hall and hear Beethoven played by a famous orchestra, visit the art exhibitions, and see those wonderful foreign films. Now there is nothing like that for them in their homeland, so they buy journals like the *New Statesman* and *Nation* and think back to their student days like self-created expatriates. This

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is sad because instead of talking to those millions of Malay farmers who have no education and no roads and who are being exploited by moneylenders, they are much more interested in the negro problems in America or in the race policies of South Africa. If one asks them about home problems and what they are doing about them, as often as not one is invited to meet the latest United Nations expert who is shortly due to arrive. The reception for him becomes to them of more interest than the problem he has come to investigate. This has so often been the story of our graduates from Oxford and Cambridge, Cairo, and Melbourne. Maybe they are changing now—for circumstances will force them to change. If they do not face the challenge in their own country other people are going to do it—other people who did not go to Cairo, to Oxford, to Sydney or to Tokyo, Malaya, like all of Asia, has a tremendous task—to solve the problems of economic growth and poverty gaps. In that task the intellectuals must give a lead and to do so their first need is to re-orientate their thinking to the fundamentals of the Asian situation.<sup>27</sup>

While still being a lecturer at the University of Malaya, he returned to Waseda University in 1963 (after 20 years, at the age of 40) to pursue a Doctorate in Economics. There, he completed and submitted his research titled *Subdivision of Estates in Malaya 1951–1960: A Report on the Pattern of Subdivision of Rubber Estates in the Federation of Malaya During the Period 1951–60, Together with A Study of the Causes of Subdivision and Its Economic and Social Effects*.<sup>28</sup> He was reported to have excelled in his examinations

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27. Ungku Abdul Aziz, “Prospects for Economic Growth in Asia,” *Asia and Australia* (1961): 55–66.

28. This study is based on a survey carried out by final year honours undergraduates of the Department of Economics, under the supervision of the staff and the direction of Ungku Aziz, at the request of the Commissioner of Lands, Federation of Malaya in his capacity as Chairman of the Committee appointed to investigate the subdivision of estates. Published in two volumes by the Department of Economics. See Ungku Abdul Aziz, *Subdivision of Estates in Malaya*, 3 vols (Kuala Lumpur: Department of Economics, University of Malaya, 1962).

and earned the highest award for his doctorate, the *hakase* award, only the second foreigner to achieve it in the history of Waseda University.<sup>29</sup>

In the 1970s, several events and statements indicate his heightened awareness on the role of Islam in the global arena and its pertinence to contemporary life. In 1979, he was invited by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) for an international discussion on “the debate within Islam.” Also in 1979, in an interview with a Malaysian magazine, *Majalah Nadi Insan*, he even suggested that learned Muslims should study the Qurʾān, Ḥadīth, and Islam in world history with a view of deriving principles, draw lessons, and to elicit a model for our present time.

Mesti dikaji dalam Qurʾān dan hadith. Apakah dia prinsip-prinsip ini sebenarnya dan juga kita harus mengkaji sejarah Islam di zaman gilang-gemilang di Timur Tengah, di Baghdad, di Samarkand dan juga Islam di Sepanyol dalam kurun ke sepuluh misalnya. Apa pengalaman dia dan daripada sejarah ini boleh kita lihat, boleh ataupun tidak kita dirikan satu model... dalam pemikiran dia tidak dibezakan antara apa yang diuruskan oleh Kerajaan dan apa yang diuruskan oleh pihak Agama disatukan benda ini semua. Ini pun semua memerlukan satu final view, satu cara berfikir...<sup>30</sup> (...The Qurʾān and Ḥadīth needs to be studied. [We need to study] the principles [of Islam] and we must also study the history of Islam during its heydays in the Middle East, Baghdad, Samarkand, and Muslim Spain during the 10th century, for instance. From history we can learn their experience and see whether we can derive a model... in the thoughts of the Muslims then, there was no dichotomy in terms what is governed by the government and the

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29. Aziz, *Sebutir Permata*, 28.

30. “Temuduga dengan Naib Canselor untuk Majalah Nadi Insan pada 1 Mei 1979.”

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religious side—there was a unifying vision. All this requires a final view [of reality], a certain way of thinking...)

This statement indicates that by this time, Ungku Aziz was generally aware of Islamic history, the fact there was a period of higher achievement among the Muslims in the past, and the fact that there was a distinct “worldview” that did not admit of a dichotomy between religion and state affairs, unlike in the West.

As for the influence of Islam on his intellectual orientation, he revealed much later in his life in a series of interviews that the writings of the 13th-century sage and poet, Jalāl al-Dīn al-Rūmī (d. 1273),<sup>31</sup> and the 20th century poet and thinker, Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938),<sup>32</sup> played key roles in the early formation of thoughts on the question of existence and societal development, and that he read widely on Islamic civilisation.<sup>33</sup> He also regarded al-Ghazālī (d. 1111),<sup>34</sup> Omar Khayyam (d.

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31. This is affirmed by his former colleague, Dato’ Professor Dr Hashim Yaacob who says that Ungku Aziz have spoken about the grand narratives of Rumi during his time at University of Malaya, see *The Renaissance Man*, 56, 43, and 44. For more on Rūmī, see Afzal Iqbal, *The Life and Work of Jalaluddin Rumi* (Oxford University Press, 1999); see also, Shams al-Dīn Ahmad al-Aflākī, *The Feats of the Knowers of God (Manāqib al-‘Arifīn)*, trans. John O’Kane (Leiden: Brill, 2001).

32. See *The Renaissance Man*, 43. For more on Iqbal, see Annemarie Schimmel, *Gabriel’s Wing: A Study into the Religious Ideas of Sir Muhammad Iqbal* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1963); Hafeez Malik (ed.), *Iqbal: Poet Philosopher of Pakistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971); and Khalifah Abdul Hakim, “Renaissance in Indo-Pakistan: Iqbal,” in *A History of Muslim Philosophy* (Lahore: Pakistan Philosophical Congress, 1963), 1614–1633.

33. See *The Renaissance Man*, 19.

34. Ungku Aziz specifically mentions in an interview that al-Ghazālī’s *Alchemy of Happiness* has left an impression on him. See Tan Gim Ean, “The Literary-Minded Professor.” Al-Ghazālī is widely regarded as the renewer of Islam (*mujaddid*) of his time and was recognized as the *Hujjat al-Islām* (Proof of Islam) by the scholarly community of the Muslims for centuries, whose influence have shaped the intellectual and spiritual life of Muslims in different part of the world. For more recent treatments on his intellectual legacy, see the proceedings of the *International Conference on al-Ghazālī’s Legacy: Its Contemporary Relevance*, International Institute

1311),<sup>35</sup> and Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406)<sup>36</sup> as among the Muslim thinkers who left the most impression on him. Ungku Aziz admitted, however, that he was only able to digest and reflect more about these Muslim luminaries later in his life, stating: “At 16, you did not have the time, patience, and background to fathom them.”<sup>37</sup>

Furthermore, Ungku Aziz also appeared to have deepened his readings and study of landmark figures and works of Western culture and civilisation. Among those who stood out in his interest was Pablo Picasso, whom he paid homage in a speech delivered in 1973. During the same decade, in 1978, Ungku Aziz was responsible for the re-publication of the first Malay translation of the Arab literary classic *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* (famously known in English as *Thousand One Nights or Arabian Nights*) by Onn Jaafar. It was published by the publisher of University of Malaya, highlighting the significance of the idea of “*adāb*” in the work. He wrote in its preface:

*Alf Laila Wa Laila* menggambarkan masyarakat Arab pada zaman Abbasiyah yang dikatakan gilang-gemilang di dalam sejarah Islam. Malahan ia juga suatu cerita yang penuh dengan tauladan, nasihat serta nikmat yang boleh memimpin pembacanya ke jalan yang baik. Soal *adāb* adalah perkara pokok di dalam beberapa peristiwa cerita itu. (*Alf Laylah wa Laylah* portrays the Arab society during the Abbasid era which is said to be glorious in the history of

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of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), 24–27th October 2001 (unpublished); and *Islam and Rationality: The Impact of al-Ghazālī. Papers Collected on His 900th Anniversary* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

35. See *The Renaissance Man*, 44. For more on Omar Khayyam, see Mehdi Aminrazavi, *The Wine of Wisdom: The Life, Poetry and Philosophy of Omar Khayyam* (London: OneWorld Publications, 2005).
36. See *The Renaissance Man*, 44. For more on Ibn Khaldūn, see Syed Farid Alatas, *Makers of Islamic Civilization: Ibn Khaldūn* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Robert Irwin, *Ibn Khaldūn: An Intellectual Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).
37. Tan Gim Ean, “The Literary-Minded Professor.”



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Islam. It is a story full of lessons, advice as well as pleasure that can guide the reader to a good path. The question of propriety (*adāb*) is the main issue in several incidents of the story.)

In 1979, Ungku Aziz also thought about the nature and relationship between Islam and economics. His statement on this indicates that he was not dismissive of it, though he was of the opinion that it requires a lot more thought and work by experts of both religion and economics:

...saya berasa sangat perlu pakar dalam bidang ini yang ada pengetahuan dalam bidang ekonomi dan ada pengetahuan dan ada minat dalam soal agama Islam bersama-sama memikir benda ini dan mencari prinsip-prinsip asasi. Tetapi sebenarnya kalau kita tengok pada hari ini memanglah di mana kalau di negara Arab, Iran maupun di Pakistan, di Bangladesh, di Indonesia atau lebih-lebih lagi di Malaysia belumlah ada satu kumpulan, fikiran atau buku yang jelas yang tercatat inilah dia prinsip ekonomi Islam atau model ekonomi Islam dan bagaimana model ini boleh dicantumkan dengan ekonomi Barat yang berjalan yang dikatakan model ekonomi ini langsunglah belum ada. Dan saya telah berundingkan perkara ini dengan profesor ekonomi Islam daripada Pakistan di Universiti-Universiti Arab yang duduk di negeri Arab, yang ada di Eropah, di Amerika dan mereka kata kami sedang mengkaji perkara ini dan dia mengakulah belum ada satu kumpulan pemikiran yang begitu jelas. (...I feel that there really needs to be experts in this field, who possess knowledge on economics and knowledge of and interest in Islam, to think together to discover the basic principles [of Islamic economics]. If we look at the situation today whether in the Arab countries, Iran, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, and more so Malaysia, there is yet to be found a group, a school of thought or a book which clearly articulates the economic principles of Islam or the

economic model of Islam, and how this model can be merged with the ongoing Western-based economic model. And I have discussed this matter with professors of Islamic economics from Pakistan, in Arab universities, in Europe, in America and they all say that they are still studying this matter and they admit there is yet a concrete school of thought (or thinking) on this matter.)<sup>38</sup>

The fact that Ungku Aziz explicitly stated in an interview his conviction that there are economic principles in Islam, in contradiction to the view which suggests otherwise, shows that he did not think in entirely secularised terms.<sup>39</sup> He lamented the fact that this matter was not being deeply studied by more people who are conversant on both Islam and economics, although on one occasion he did acknowledge the work of Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī on *Fiqh al-Zakāh*.<sup>40</sup>

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38. “Temuduga dengan Naib Canselor untuk Majalah Nadi Insan pada 1 Mei 1979,” 25.
39. Ibid. In 1969, Fazlur Rahman of Pakistan has published an article titled “Economic Principles of Islam,” *Islamic Studies* 8, no. 1 (1969): 1–8, which Ungku Aziz may not have come across. It must be noted that Ungku Aziz attended the 1976 World of Islam Festival in London, where his cousin Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas delivered a lecture, and where he met other Muslim scholars such as Sayyed Hossein Nasr. His attendance in this event may have increased his awareness on the contemporary debates of Islam.
40. It was said by Dato’ Seri Anwar Ibrahim, current Prime Minister of Malaysia, in his tribute to Ungku Aziz that he had organised a meeting between Ungku Aziz and Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī. See: “Temuduga dengan Naib Canselor untuk Majalah Nadi Insan pada 1 Mei 1979.” Although no names were mentioned in this interview, it is likely that the person Ungku Aziz was referring to is Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī (he was the Dean of the Faculty of Shari’ah and Islamic Studies at University of Qatar between 1977–1990) who has written the *Fiqh al-Zakāh* (which was originally his PhD thesis completed in 1973), and whom Ungku Aziz had met and discussed for two hours during the his visit to Malaysia in 1979. It is later confirmed in a 2001 news report that Ungku Aziz had read Qaradāwī’s *Fiqh al-Zakāh* which has been translated into English. See *Utusan Malaysia*, “Zakat: Baitulmal di setiap negeri perlu kemuka laporan tahunan terperinci,” 4th December 2001; and Aziz Zariza, *Sebutir Permata*, 83.

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In 1976 and onwards, when he was giving lectures on the philosophy of the mind at the Faculty of Science of University of Malaya—as part of the undergraduate’s final year compulsory course on “Philosophy of Science”<sup>41</sup>—he must have been already acquainted with Sigmund Freud’s *The Ego and the Id*, Arthur Koestler’s *The Act of Creation*, Carl Sagan’s *The Dragons of Eden*, and Karl Popper’s *The Self and Its Brain: An Argument for Interactionism*. All of these did not necessarily shape his own belief on the reality of the mind and the self, but they likely informed him and enabled him to make broader connections to the debates taking place in the West.

Ungku Aziz thought the learned Malays in earlier centuries have much to teach to his contemporaries. When he launched a workshop on researching the oral tradition in story patterns (*Bengkel Pangkajian Tradisi Lisan Bercorak Cerita*) by Malaysia’s Ministry of Youth and Culture, he publicly urged the learned community in Malaysia to study the thinking of the Malay people of the past so that the findings can be used to contribute to the progress of this nation.<sup>42</sup> Then, in 1985, Ungku Aziz took the initiative to request Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas—his learned cousin whom he acknowledged as an expert on Malay literature and Islam<sup>43</sup>—to study the contents of a rare Jawi-Malay manuscript that he acquired in London. He confessed that he did not know of its content initially, which turned out to be a 16th century and the oldest known Malay manuscript entitled *Aqā’id al-Nasafī*, which is a treatise on the Sunnī theology. Through this manuscript and the discovery of

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41. See Mohd Hazim Shah, “A Tribute to, and in Memory of, Royal Professor Ungku Aziz,” *Southeast Asian Social Science Review* 6, no. 1 (2021): 149–152.

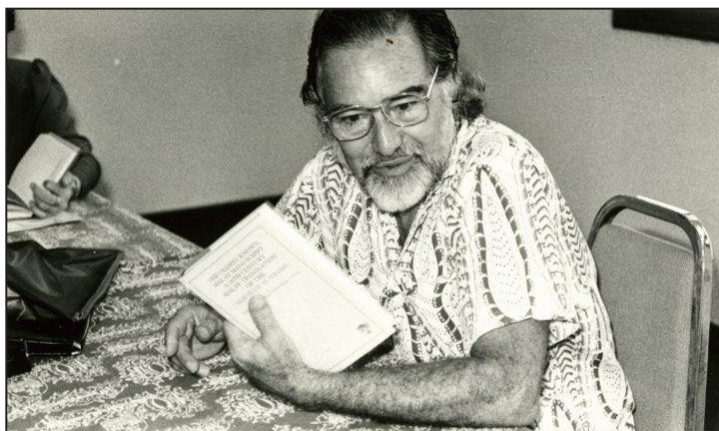
42. *Utusan Melayu*. “Cerdik pandai diseru kaji pemikiran orang Melayu dahulu,” 4th October 1983.

43. In the 1990s, Ungku Aziz often visited al-Attas, who was then Founder-Director of the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation (ISTAC), for private discussions. Ungku Aziz also made a symbolic presence and gesture of support to al-Attas during the launch of a publication in the latter’s honour in 2010 which was graced by the then Prince of Perak, Raja Nazrin Shah.

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its significance to the history of the Malays by al-Attas, Ungku Aziz was further convinced of the lofty thinking capacity of the Malays in the past, much of which has been lost after the colonial period. During the launching ceremony of this book, he proudly remarked to the media: “Now we want to show to the world this vital fact of history.”<sup>44</sup>

Figure 1 Ungku Aziz with a copy of the *Oldest Known Malay Manuscript: A 16th Century Malay Translation of the ‘Aqā’id al-Nasafī*.



Even after his retirement as Vice-Chancellor of University Malaya in 1988, Ungku Aziz never stopped expanding his thinking on a range of areas and issues to which he had either been exposed or reflected on before. One area is the subject of *taṣawwuf*.<sup>45</sup> One personal favourite of his was al-Ghazālī’s *Alchemy of Happiness*. He also said that the likes of al-Ghazālī and Rūmī interested him as “philosophers, psychologists, and mystics.”<sup>46</sup>

44. *New Straits Times*, “Ancient text sheds light on use of Malay,” 25th April 1987.

45. See Asmah, *Riwayat Ungku Aziz*, 90.

46. Tan Gim Ean, “The Literary-Minded Professor.”

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Ungku Aziz's inclinations to the works of al-Ghazālī and Rūmī, even though only in translations and during the later years of his life, may have indeed fortified further his understanding of the worldview of Islam which arguably continued to mature towards the end of his life.

Due to his continuous exposure to the great books and ideas of the humanities, mind and thoughts evolved further with religion playing a more prominent role. This can be seen especially in his newspaper piece, *Human Resources—the key to achieve Vision 2020*,<sup>47</sup> which demonstrates his affirmation of the role of religion in relation to the question of development of the nation. Another piece is *The Role of the University in Asia in the 21st Century*,<sup>48</sup> which reveals that Ungku Aziz was aware on the distinction of the secular viewpoint on the question of the role of university vis-a-vis the viewpoint of Islam and Asian religious and philosophical traditions.

By the 2000s, Ungku Aziz continued his study on pantun which was intertwined with his interest in the mysteries of the mind. His study on the *pantun* gave him a glimpse of the mind, ingenuity, and intelligence of the Malays of the past, which may also be seen as an attempt to inspire the contemporary Malays to greater heights in thinking and life. He published a book entitled *Pantun dan Kebijaksanaan Akal Budi Melayu*<sup>49</sup> and, towards the end of his life, compiled around 20,000 pantun under the theme *Hikmah dalam Pantun Melayu* (wisdom in the Malay pantun) which he had intended to be his next book.<sup>50</sup> The choice of terms in these two works deserves attention and

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47. Ungku Aziz, "Human Resources—the key to achieve Vision 2020," *The Star*, 20th January 1992.

48. In Torsten Husen (ed.), *The Role of the University: A Global Perspective* (Tokyo: The United Nations University, 1994), 47–63.

49. Ungku Aziz, *Pantun dan Kebijaksanaan Akal Budi Melayu* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 2011).

50. Anwar Faiz Ahmad Tajudin, "Waxing poetic," *The Sun*, 8th August 2011. According to his daughter, Tan Sri Zeti Akhtar Aziz, this work remains incomplete and unpublished.

it may be another indication of his worldview at this stage of his life: firstly, *akal* (intellect, from the Arabic *ʿaql*), and secondly, *hikmah* (wisdom). As a person who is quite deliberative with words by this time, it is probable that Ungku Aziz decided to choose terms which are more reflective of the semantic field of the worldview of Islam.

Also, in the year 2000 (when he was 78 years old), Ungku Aziz continued to think about how *Tabung Haji* could be more Islamic in its operations.<sup>51</sup> This is because he found that the fund was becoming more of a corporate body with various activities including investment and real estate, whereas for him it would be better and Islamic if it gave more attention to accommodate lower-income Muslims to help them perform the hajj while they were still young. He also thought that the capital gain or profits made by the fund from its investments should be shared with the depositors because the money invested came from them, instead of merely creating more wealth for *Tabung Haji*.<sup>52</sup>

Towards the end of his life, Ungku Aziz spent more time reading and studying the Qurʾān aside from his other interests. In an interview in 1991 when he was 69 years old, Ungku Aziz said that he read the Qurʾān daily in Arabic and then its translations to check its meanings. His going back and forth with the Holy Book lasted for ten years. The following statement when he was 90 years old perhaps reinforces his affirmation of the worldview of Islam in his mind:

Kalau sudah tiba masanya saya akan terima dengan tenang hati, Alhamdulillah, Tuhan sudah beri saya peluang selama ini dan saya tidak akan minta hendak hidup lama lagi hanya kerana mahu lakukan itu dan ini. Tetapi kalau Tuhan beri saya nyawa panjang lagi satu tahun atau 10 tahun, saya terima dan bersyukur. (If the time comes (for death),

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51. “‘Trust not only for pilgrimage’—Ungku Aziz: *Tabung Haji* has encouraged savings habit among Malays,” *New Straits Times*, 28th September 2000.

52. *Ibid.*

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I will accept it with peaceful heart, Praise be to the Almighty, God has given me the opportunity all this while and I would not ask for my life to be prolonged further to do this or that. But if God prolongs my life for another year or ten years, I will accept it and be grateful.<sup>53</sup>

Figure 2: Ungku Aziz walking behind Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas and the then Raja Nazrin Shah (now Sultan Nazrin Shah) in 2010 at UTM Kuala Lumpur.



### **Ungku Aziz’s Explorations of the Mind and Its Potential**

At the point of writing this article, the author has yet to be able to locate at which stage of his career Ungku Aziz became preoccupied with the problem of the nature of the mind, its inner workings, and potentials. Be this as it may, from the various scattered materials the author has gathered, certain themes can be discerned.

Firstly, he believed that the emphasis on thinking has not been given due attention in his society and that rote memorisation

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53. Hafizahril Hamid and Khairunnisa Sulaiman, “Tips sihat Prof Ungku Aziz,” *Mingguan Malaysia*, 19th February 2012.



reigns supreme to the detriment of thinking.<sup>54</sup> One headline which captured this concern of his is *Utusan Malaysia*'s periodical article dated 18th August 1986, *Universiti perlu lahirkan pemikir bukan penghafal* (*Universities need to produce thinkers, not memorisers*). He was concerned not only about the role of universities in this regard but also the state of the Malay minds, which he described as “tragic.” He observed that there was a tendency for the average present-day Malays to be limited in their perspective, dislike investigation, and not want to think deeply.<sup>55</sup> Upon closer inspection, it is obvious that Ungku Aziz was merely attempting to provoke the Malays, especially among the leaders, to think about such matters more seriously, especially with regards to the educational agenda of the country. It was for this reason also that Ungku Aziz recurrently expressed that the techniques of thinking can and should be taught to students at all levels, and this is why he was attracted to and promoted the practical tips and techniques as advocated by the likes of Edward De Bono<sup>56</sup> with his “lateral thinking”<sup>57</sup> method, and Tony Buzan with his “mind mapping” method.

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54. See for example, *New Straits Times* report on 14th August 1986: “Need to have ‘thinking’ pupils,” where Ungku Aziz is reported to have said, “The education system in our country artificialises the human mind and create students who memorise information just for examinations.”
  55. Ungku Aziz, “Tragedi Pemikiran Melayu,” *Utusan Malaysia*, 3rd February 2002. In Malay it is as expressed as such: “Kalau ditanya tentang minda orang Melayu kepada saya, saya rasa Melayu tidak sanggup berubah. Perspektif mereka terhadap, tidak suka menyiasat dan mereka tidak mahu berfikir dengan mendalam.”
  56. Edward De Bono is critical of traditional Aristotelean logic which he regards as “adversarial” and not necessarily useful for thinking. His exposition on lateral thinking can be found in his book titled *Five Thinking Hats*.
  57. Ungku Aziz, “Master the art of lateral thinking, says Ungku Aziz,” *New Straits Times*, 31st December 1987. It is also important to note in connection to this, Ungku Aziz suggested that people should strive to improve their vocabulary because logical thinking could only be achieved with a wide command of a language. He explained, “There is no thinking without knowing words, and the more words one knows the easier it is to think... this is especially true in terms of [thinking on] abstract matters.”



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Secondly, and in relation to the first theme above, he believed that the traditional Malays of the past possessed sophisticated minds and were more in-tune with nature. In his keynote address for the International Conference on Language and the Perception of Time and Space 1992 organised by the Language Centre, University of Malaya, Ungku Aziz wove together what he understood to be the traditional Malay mind. He did so by drawing from Islamic theological treatises, classical forms of Malay poetry such as *pantun*, *syair*, and *hikayat*, and comparing it with the minds of the modern Malays, arguing that there was a shift which created negative stress that brought about new mental illnesses unknown to the traditional Malays. For him, the traditional Malay minds understood a more harmonious relationship between man and the environment, unlike the modern Malay minds which have forgotten or lost this notion of “harmony with the environment.” Instead, the modern Malay minds aligned more with the industrial mindset which is reflective of a disturbed state of mind and negative stress.<sup>58</sup>

Thirdly, at some point of his life, Ungku Aziz appeared to be aware of the distinction between the Western secular worldview with those of Asian civilisations, including Islam. This is especially explicit in two of his later articles. The first article is *Must Patterns of Change in Developing Countries Follow the West? What Other Possible Patterns?*, where he explained in a paragraph that different societies adhere to different “value-systems.”<sup>59</sup> An example he chose with which to illustrate his point is secularism that is prevalent in Western universities,

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58. Ungku Aziz, “Space and Time in the Malay Mind,” *New Straits Time*, 19th June 1992. This observation by Ungku Aziz deals with the question of cosmology or cosmos under the realm of philosophy—traditionally informed by Islam, as well as other Eastern philosophical traditions. This piece is arguably the most philosophical writing of Ungku Aziz.

59. Ungku A. Aziz, “Must Patterns of Change in Developing Countries Follow the West? What Other Possible Patterns?,” *Technological Innovation: University Roles; the Report of the Proceedings of the Thirteenth Congress of the Universities of the Commonwealth, Birmingham August 1983* (Birmingham: The Association of Commonwealth Universities, 1984), 61.

that is, how the West accepts a “binary system” which leads their universities to develop in ever-divergent patterns. As for Muslim countries, he contended, “there are rules and values as set out in the Qurʾān and in the Sunnah which must be abided by without let or quibble.”<sup>60</sup> In his second article, *The Role of the University in Asia in the 21st Century*,<sup>61</sup> Ungku Aziz argued that in Asia, the institutions of higher learning do not necessarily have to imitate the “democracy” of secularised Western universities which have abandoned the aspect of character-building, or *adāb*, in producing scholars.<sup>62</sup> In 1991, Ungku Aziz affirmed the same point pertaining the spiritual aspect in the conception of

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60. Ibid., 61. The entire context of this statement is as follows: “Different societies have different value systems. For example, let us select an issue like secularism. In the development of universities in the West, the majority of citizens accepts a kind of binary system which differentiates between that which is rendered ‘unto Caesar’, or the state, and that which is rendered unto their respective churches. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the industrial revolution was accompanied by movements of secularism and opposition to the political and social domination of the Christian church in Europe. The idea of the individual being free to make his choice of God and morality dominated social and political thinking. This influenced the patterns of the development of universities, both Oxford and Redbrick, through to the present. Tolerance became a watchword. I have seen a professor on British television apologising for believing in God. However, in a country such as Pakistan or Malaysia, that recognises Islam as the state religion, we have a totally different situation. Although other religions are tolerated in Malaysia and people are free to practice their particular creeds, for the Muslims and for the state there are rules and values as set out in the Qurʾān and in the Sunnah which must be abided by without let or quibble. In such a situation, even if we had perfect technological changes, social changes are bound to be rather different from those in Western secular societies.”

61. Ungku A. Aziz, “The Role of the University in Asia in the 21st Century,” in *The Role of the University: A Global Perspective*, 47–63.

62. “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 *adāb* in Islam. It is possible that in the 19th and 20th centuries the concept of a secularised 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.” See Ibid., 59.

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human being when he articulated the idea of “human resource.”<sup>63</sup> All this shows that Ungku Aziz was generally aware of the metaphysical differences between the worldviews of Islam and the Asian traditions and that of the West.

Fourthly, Ungku Aziz’s thinking on the unity between the humanities and the STEM fields reflects the worldview that he affirmed, where he did not subscribe to the artificial and dichotomous boundaries between the humanities and STEM fields. Moreover, he continued to expand on this thinking after his retirement. At some point in his career, he was conscious of the need to promote multi-disciplinary learning in higher education. In his 1975 paper titled *The Development of Postgraduate Education in Developing Commonwealth Countries*, he noted:

There is a perceptible lack of inter-disciplinary cooperation. There is little cooperation between departments, faculties or between universities as well as national research institutes or other public authorities which have staff and facilities that may be useful for the pursuit of advanced research. Thus, most units operate on a relatively small scale. There are few occasions for intellectual interaction between researchers in complementary or other disciplines.<sup>64</sup>

It was for this reason he founded the Institute of Advanced Studies (IAS) in 1979 at the University of Malaya and introduced humanities subjects to natural and applied sciences programs such as philosophy and history of science and philosophy of mind.<sup>65</sup> In 1992, he expressed:

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63. Idem, “Human Resources—the key to achieve Vision 2020.”

64. Idem, “The Development of Postgraduate Education in Developing Commonwealth Countries,” *Draft V/1.4.75, Paper for ACU Conference*, 2.

65. Ungku Aziz had special fascination with how the mind works, its proper use, and its potential. Among the Western authors he often recommends included Edward De Bono’s *Thinking Course*, and Tony Buzan’s *Mind Map*, and *Head First*. His interest in *pantun* is also linked to his fascination with the intelligence of the Malays of the past.

The traditional barriers between subjects are being reinforced by increasing scholarly specialization... (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.<sup>66</sup>

In addition, when speaking about the kind of education system we need for the future, he drew attention to great thinkers of the past such as Ibn Sīnā and Omar Khayyam. He envisioned an education of the future where graduates may,

...in fact, return to the Renaissance man like Benvenuto Cellini or Omar Khayyam—men who were experts in several fields—music, mathematics, astronomy, and poetry, etc. Quite unlike our present-day so-called specialists who aspire to know more and more about less and less until they know everything about nothing.<sup>67</sup>

Another related thought is that he wanted students, parents, and teachers to expand their cultural horizons by reading works in various fields of knowledge:

...there should be serious efforts to interest all students, parents and, of course, teachers in expanding their cultural horizons by reading an ever-widening range of works in the various fields of knowledge, science, and literature in both languages, including translations from a variety of languages. Reading should be enjoyed for its own sake as well as for passing examinations.<sup>68</sup>

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66. Ungku Abdul Aziz, “The Role of the University,” 58.

67. Idem, “A Vision of Education in the 21st Century,” in O.S. Tan et al. (eds.), *Global Voices in Education* (Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore Pte Ltd., 2007), 27.

68. Idem, “Bilingual approach to learning,” *New Sunday Times*, 9th November 2008.

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Thus, for Ungku Aziz, education should serve to open windows of the mind so that people can pursue happiness without exploiting others, for this should be the aim of education aside from building a society with a good life. In fact, a good society with a good quality of life presupposes a society the members of which are individuals with good minds that are developed by a total life education.

Finally, one of Ungku Aziz's propositions, the assumptions and premises of which deserve further reflection and scrutiny, is the introduction of the term *minda* into the Malay vocabulary, since he noticed that there are no equivalent Malay terms which conveyed the same conceptual meaning as the English term "mind."<sup>69</sup> However, this point is beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, it deserves further scrutiny because the Malay vocabularies include vast bodies of Jawi works that span centuries throughout the history of the intellectual Malay tradition. And it is probable that Ungku Aziz did not have the opportunity to exhaustively survey and analyse these writings.

## **Conclusion**

By scrutinising Ungku Aziz's life in chronological order, readings, and intellectual journey, the facts reveal that Ungku Aziz's mind must have been shaped by the various personal and intellectual exposures throughout his life—beginning with a basic religious awareness imparted by his father, fortified further with various aspects from the Eastern philosophies, Western humanist traditions, and, in the later phase of his life, with the Islamic philosophical tradition. The experiences of witnessing the difficult rural life in Johor, encounters with his uncle Dato' Onn Jaafar, his brief residence in Japan during his teenage years,

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69. There is a dedicated study on this in Malay, which I have recently discovered is the first-ever study on any aspect of Ungku Aziz's thought: Mohd Nizam Ismail, *Ungku Abdul Aziz: Ideanya Terhadap Minda, Pemikiran Luas dan Budaya* (Kuala Lumpur: Jabatan Penulisan, Universiti Malaya, 1990).

and his close engagements with various influential thinkers and scholars must have all shaped his thinking in one way or the other. His familiarity with the Western secular-humanists such as Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx can be viewed as his intellectual interlocutors, with whose ideas he would not necessarily agree. Moreover, the fact that he recommended Muslims to read the *Muqaddimah* of Ibn Khaldūn, considered Rūmī and Muhammad Iqbal as his sources of inspiration Islam, and owed his understanding on the meaning of life from al-Ghazālī's *Alchemy of Happiness* indicate his inclination to the philosophical outlook and value-system of Islam.

As his discourses in later years reveal, Ungku Aziz was of the view that since the problems of the modern world have not conveniently fitted themselves into the pigeonholes of university departments, many complex problems in society need to be studied from a cross-disciplinary or multi-disciplinary approach. This is why he encouraged students to recognise different disciplines accordingly. In other words, Ungku Aziz espoused a more universal (*kullīyy*) outlook instead of a particularised (*juz'īyy*) outlook towards life and scholarship, which was most likely informed by his exposure to great Muslim thinkers of the past such as Ibn Sīnā, Omar Khayyam, Ibn Khaldūn, al-Ghazālī, and others, as well as his familiarity with the great literary figures of the world. This multi-disciplinary approach, including his recognition of the field of humanities, may have indeed made him more thoughtful, more humane, and more selfless about his specialised field, which is economics, and the challenges in society he sought to overcome.

As a whole, this article finds that Ungku Aziz had a discerning mind; one that distinguishes between truth and falsehood in accordance with the worldview of Islam and not based on the reductionist worldview of the secular-West; one that is conscious of Western intellectual hegemony in the modern period and sought not to be dominated by it nor be its captive even though he was most appreciative of the great artistic and scientific contributions from the West; one that is aware of the

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rich resources of wisdom offered by the great world civilisations; and one that is somewhat informed by the fields of arts and the humanities with which he was familiar since he was young. While there are areas of Ungku Aziz's discussions and statements which could be more informed by insights from the intellectual tradition of Islam, Ungku Aziz generally held a more nuanced and learned view of Islam as a religion and civilisation—different from many other economists or Western-trained academics of his time. Seeing the perpetual relevance and profundity that can be gleaned from a survey of the intellectual journey and thinking of Ungku Aziz, this paper would like to recommend for the Government of Malaysia, Malaysia's corporate sector, and the Royal family (to whom he belonged) to invest and dedicate a space or a one-stop centre where future generations can learn and be inspired by the life, thoughts, and works of Ungku Aziz, aside from a special endowment fund for researchers to continue the exploration on areas which Ungku Aziz have thought about. May God accept his deeds and forgive his shortcomings.

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