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Eye on occident

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PROFESSOR Shamsul Amri Baharuddin of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia is undaunted by the prospect of simultaneously starting a brand new institute and managing an existing one.

In fact, holding two posts at the same time - Shamsul is the newly-appointed director of the Institute of Occidental Studies (referred to as Ikon, its Malay acronym) and continues to lead the Institute of the Malay World and Civilisation (better known by its Malay acronym, Atma), both at UKM - suits the bubbly 52-year-old just fine.

The social anthropologist and expert on the Malay world is a workaholic - if he is not abroad, he works almost seven days a week - and you can hardly catch him without his laptop.

"This is something I have always wanted to do," says Shamsul of his new task of setting up an institute to study western civilisation, reportedly the first of its kind in the world. "It is like participating in the Olympics of academia."

The institute was set up following a suggestion by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad at the Umno General Assembly in June that Malaysians scrutinise the Occident, which refers to the countries in the West, especially those in Europe and America regarded as culturally distinct from eastern nations (the Orient).

Shamsul views the arrival of Ikon as a most welcome development in the history of knowledge in Malaysia "as we move with the rest of the world into the knowledge-based era".

"It is an exercise in knowledge creation in the area of productive understanding of all our partners in the global context," he says.

The new institute's term of reference is "to study firsthand from a non-Western perspective the internal workings of western civilisation that is found not only in Europe but also in Australasia, North and South America and the European Russian continent to better understand its heterogeneous and fragmented nature".

"We must study western civilisation wherever it exists. We need new knowledge about the West that we ourselves acquire rather than the second-hand variety. For instance, when we talk about Islam in Europe, we want Malaysian scholars to go there and see it for themselves," says the new director of Ikon.

"Now, how much do we know about the differences in Europe? Almost nothing. Most of our information about countries in the West comes from popular publications such as Lonely Planet, a useful travel guide book but lacking in substantive knowledge."

"Has anyone ever tried to study the linguistic plurality of South East Europe - covering Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and the state of Serbia and Montenegro - which is almost similar to Southeast Asia?"

Non-Westerners currently view the West purely from the perspective of Westerners and criticisms about it are actually those made by Occidentalists themselves.

"That is because we have never been there. We went there to study but we never studied them. We never understood them, we don't want to understand them," says Shamsul.

Now, he adds, Malaysia is consciously making an effort to research western civilisation "with the advantage of avoiding the failings of

orientalism" - a reference to the western perception of the Orient dominated by colonial interests.

Malaysia's investigation of the West will not be driven by any interest comparable to that of the colonial power in the past, as clearly highlighted in *The Myth of the Lazy Native*, a 1977 publication by Professor Datuk Syed Hussein Alatas, the scholar Shamsul describes as his mentor.

*The Myth of the Lazy Native*, a 267-page hardback, is an attempt to analyse the origins and functions of the notion of the "lazy native" - an object created by European colonialism - who was considered indolent by nature or because of his environment from the 16th to the 20th century in Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia.

Naming Shamsul the director of Ikon is a foregone conclusion; there is a broad consensus (of opinion) among many academics locally and abroad that he is the best person for the job. (See report above)

Shamsul does not know why he was chosen but offers one possible explanation; he runs an institute - Atma - that is basically interested in examining orientalism critically.

"Occidentalism is the twin brother of orientalism but we never see it that way. Until now, Atma was without its sibling. But the missing brother is finally home," says Shamsul, with a dash of drama.

"I don't see why it would be difficult to deal with Ikon and Atma together," adds Shamsul, alluding to comments that suggest so.

Atma, of course, is the first research centre for Malay world studies in Malaysia. Formed in 1972 as the Institute of Malay Language, Literature and Culture, Atma evolved into its present structure in 1993.

Its main purpose is to gather scholars from everywhere to build up a comprehensive collection of information and knowledge about the Malay world and civilisation.

Since April 2000, Atma has held five international conferences on the theme *The Construction of Knowledge about the Malay World by Others* involving more than 100 scholars from this region and the rest of the world.

"Others" refer to mainly non-English speakers and writers.

The Malay world is the maritime-riverine complex of the region which includes present-day Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Southern Thailand, Southern Philippines and Southern Kampuchea. The Malay world was previously referred to as the "Malay archipelago" or "Nusantara".

Central to the exercise is the desire to rectify the current dependency on knowledge about the Malay world from English sources; there is little input from Indian, Chinese, Arab, Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, Japanese, French, German and Nordic writers.

"The series of conferences provided us with a golden opportunity to learn, firsthand, what others, especially non-English speakers outside the Malay world, had said about the region and its civilisation based on the reports, records and writings of travellers, missionaries, sailors, merchants, scientists, scholars and administrators who had visited or stayed in these parts," says Shamsul.

A conference on Dutch Scholarship and the Malay World kicked off the series and that was subsequently followed by discussions on French Scholarship and the Malay World, Nordic Scholarship and the Malay World, German Scholarship and the Malay World and Chinese Scholarship and the Malay World.

These conferences allowed Malaysians to examine European thinking on the Malay world and civilisation.

Next on the list is Japanese Scholarship and the Malay World which will be held early next year.

Projects about the Occident initiated by Atma reveal that "we need to understand both orientalism and occidentalism", says Shamsul, who was the main author of the working paper on the formation of Ikon at UKM; it was later accepted by the Cabinet and a new institute was born.

To Shamsul, housing Ikon in Atma for a period of time makes perfect sense.

Since Atma is the only institute in Malaysia which has been dealing with orientalism and occidentalism together as an academic project, it is only appropriate that Ikon be incubated in the older institution first.

"As a new institute, Ikon needs help to get started," says Shamsul, adding that it need not worry about facilities necessary to begin work.

More importantly, there will be a free flow of ideas and information between the two institutes consistent with their symbiotic relationship.

Shamsul has already identified those he want to invite as fellows to the new institute.

Professor Hassan Hanafi, head of the Department of Philosophy at the University of Cairo and a former researcher at the United Nations University in Tokyo, has accepted Shamsul's invitation for a short stint at Ikon as the first Visiting Professor early next year.

Hanafi is credited with being the founder of the occidentalist movement in the Arab world; it is a positive response to the late Professor Edward Said's critique of western orientalism.

In 1992, Hanafi published a book of 881 pages about occidentalism entitled *Muquaddima fi ilm al-Istighrab* which translates to Introduction to the Science of Occidentalism.

The scholar's aim is to objectivate the Occident in the same manner that Westerners used to do it with the Orient; the goal is to recreate an independent Arabic intellectual tradition.

For the local fellows "we have several scholars who have done a lot of work on European history and English literature and we would like them to join us", Shamsul says.

The creation of the new institute made quite a splash in the foreign Press.

Following an interview with the British Broadcasting Corporation two weeks ago, Shamsul was contacted by other radio stations in Hong Kong, Australia, Japan and Europe eager for news on the new development in Malaysia.

The South China Morning Post, a broadsheet in Hong Kong, e-mailed the scholar 20 questions on the new institute and his appointment as its director.

"The response is simply incredible," says Shamsul.

"I think the magic word is occidentalism. Ikon is about the rest of the world, so it will be relevant wherever the tentacles of Western civilisation have spread."

"Indeed, I was told by the BBC reporter that Ikon is the first institute of its kind in the world and the BBC should know; it has people everywhere," he adds.

To be sure, programmes on European and American studies are offered by various tertiary bodies worldwide but, until now, there was no institute solely dedicated to the study of western civilisation.

Against that backdrop, Shamsul's immediate plan is to explain the concept of occidentalism to UKM denizens and the public.

"I think that is important because Ikon is a Malaysian institute with a global reach," he says.

A one-day seminar on occidentalism will be held on Nov 17; Shamsul and Syed Hussein will give talks on the subject.

The following month, Shamsul will travel to four countries in Europe at

the invitation of the Asia-Europe Foundation based in Singapore.

That will be a great opportunity to tell Europe about Ikon, he says.

"What I want to do is to tell Europeans that there is a great deal of interest in Asia to actually understand the Occident and that this curiosity is not out of animosity but out of a great desire to communicate better with the West," he adds.

For the ever-positive Shamsul, the excitement is just beginning.