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Professor Shamsul heads Ikon

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KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - Professor Shamsul Amri Baharuddin, a social anthropologist and an expert on the Malay world, has been appointed director of a new institute at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia to study Western civilisation.

The Institute of Occidental Studies was formed following a suggestion by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad at the Umno General Assembly in June that Malaysians investigate the Occident.

Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak subsequently announced that an institute of occidental studies would be established.

Shamsul's appointment has ended weeks of speculation over the likely candidate to head the institute, now referred to by its Malay acronym, Ikon.

Shamsul, 52, will continue as director of The Institute of the Malay World and Civilisation (better known by its Malay acronym, Atma) at UKM.

This follows the decision to incubate Ikon in Atma for a period of time.

Shamsul, who received his letter of appointment today, will take up his new post on Wednesday.

"It is a rather fateful coincidence that in the wake of Edward Said's passing, an Institute of Occidental Studies is being established at UKM," said Shamsul, referring to the late Professor Edward Said, a Palestinian-born intellectual who died last week.

Said has been hailed by many scholars the world over as "one of the greatest intellectuals and public activists of our time".

"Is Ikon going to be a vehicle for that `voyage' Said had proposed as a strategy to understand the Occident? That we will have to wait and see," said Shamsul, who described Said as his intellectual inspiration.

Shamsul researches, lectures and writes extensively on politics, religion, culture and economic development with an empirical focus on Malaysia and Southeast Asia.

His award-winning book From British to Bumiputera Rule (Singapore: Iseas, 1986) is now being reprinted for the third time.

He has just completed working on two book manuscripts, namely The Discourse of Identity in Modern Malaysia: Consensus and Contestation and The Making of Moderate Islam: The Malaysian Experience, both of which are now being considered for publication by an international publisher.

Three years ago, Shamsul was invited as Distinguished Visiting Professor to present a public lecture on Contemporary Malaysian Politics, Religion, Economy and Society at the International Studies Centre at Harvard University.

Shamsul was recently appointed a member of the Policy Advisory Committee (2002-2005) of the Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research, a branch of the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research which belongs to the Royal Academy of the Netherlands.