

An 'ocean of knowledge' he was

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COMMENT

By Syed Akbar Ali

PROFESSOR Datuk Dr Syed Hussein Alatas, who died on Tuesday, was someone the Arabs would call a *ba-hara ulum* or an "ocean of knowledge".

The sociologist was among the greatest modern intellectuals in the Malay archipelago and a wide-ranging interest in a variety of subjects.

I met Alatas about 15 years ago. I had written an opinion piece in the NST, which included comments about a Hassidic Jewish sect called the Lubavitchers in New York.

This information triggered the professor's interest. He passed a message to me through the writer Kassim Ahmad.

When I called to meet him, the professor asked me to come by his house at 10pm. My wife thought it was a bit late to be visiting someone who was already 64 years old. I went to his house at the appointed hour and we started a long conversation.

Close to midnight, the professor stood up and said, "I make very good coffee. Would you like a cup of coffee?" After coffee, we continued the

conversation until about 2am.

Many visitors to the professor's living room knew his penchant for late night discussions and the delayed cup of coffee. Professor had his favourite chair and footrest in the living room.

His wife Datin Zaharah would sometimes join in the conversations but would retire much earlier.

He could hold the fort on a vast array of subjects. His cats lived for 12 years because they were fed only natural unprocessed food.

He was an expert on OMT or Ortho-Molecular Therapy, which means eating proper food and taking vitamin supplements to help the body heal itself.

He once prescribed a 30-day diet for my cholesterol and uric acid levels, which shocked my doctor. After

30 days of this diet, my cholesterol and uric acid levels became normal or slightly below.

My doctor was surprised at how I had achieved this in just 30 days without any medication. Here is the diet: Oats for breakfast with some vegetables thrown in, salad and one hard-boiled egg with two slices of wheat bread for lunch, eat anything for dinner but it must be preceded by about half a kilogramme of steamed vegetables.

I smoke a pipe but professor had been smoking pipes for decades. He once spoke the whole night about pipe-smoking, how to hold a pipe and blending pipe tobacco.

About three years ago, he accompanied me to his favourite pipe shop in Kuala Lumpur and helped me pick out a new pipe. It was a straight-edged pipe as opposed to a curved one. Reason: A straight-edged pipe is easier to clean and can be set down without a pipe holder.

We also used to talk a lot about Islam and religion — another area of his expertise. Both of us did not agree

with the run-of-the-mill religious types we find in our country. He asked me for a copy of a concordia of the Quran, which I frequently used for reference.

One night he called me and asked me to look up a particular word. It just so happened that the concordia which I gave him was missing that particular page.

Professor was never too far removed from politics. Besides founding Parti Gerakan in the 1960s, he was later an active political adviser.

From 2001 to 2002, I had the honour of serving with the professor in a political think-tank. For two years on Monday nights I would fetch professor from his home, attend the meetings and then drive him home again. Often I stayed on for the late-night coffee and a rehash of the country's politics.

Since last year, Professor Alatas was trying to get access to use the Universiti Malaya library for his research. He also wanted a study room at the university where he was once the vice-chancellor.

I last spoke to professor a few days before he died. I was inviting him to a book launching ceremony.

He said he would be busy on that date but he asked me to send him the invitation anyway. I was unable to deliver the invitation to him personally so I mailed it to him — on Tuesday, Jan 23. He died later that night at age 79. He was a good man.