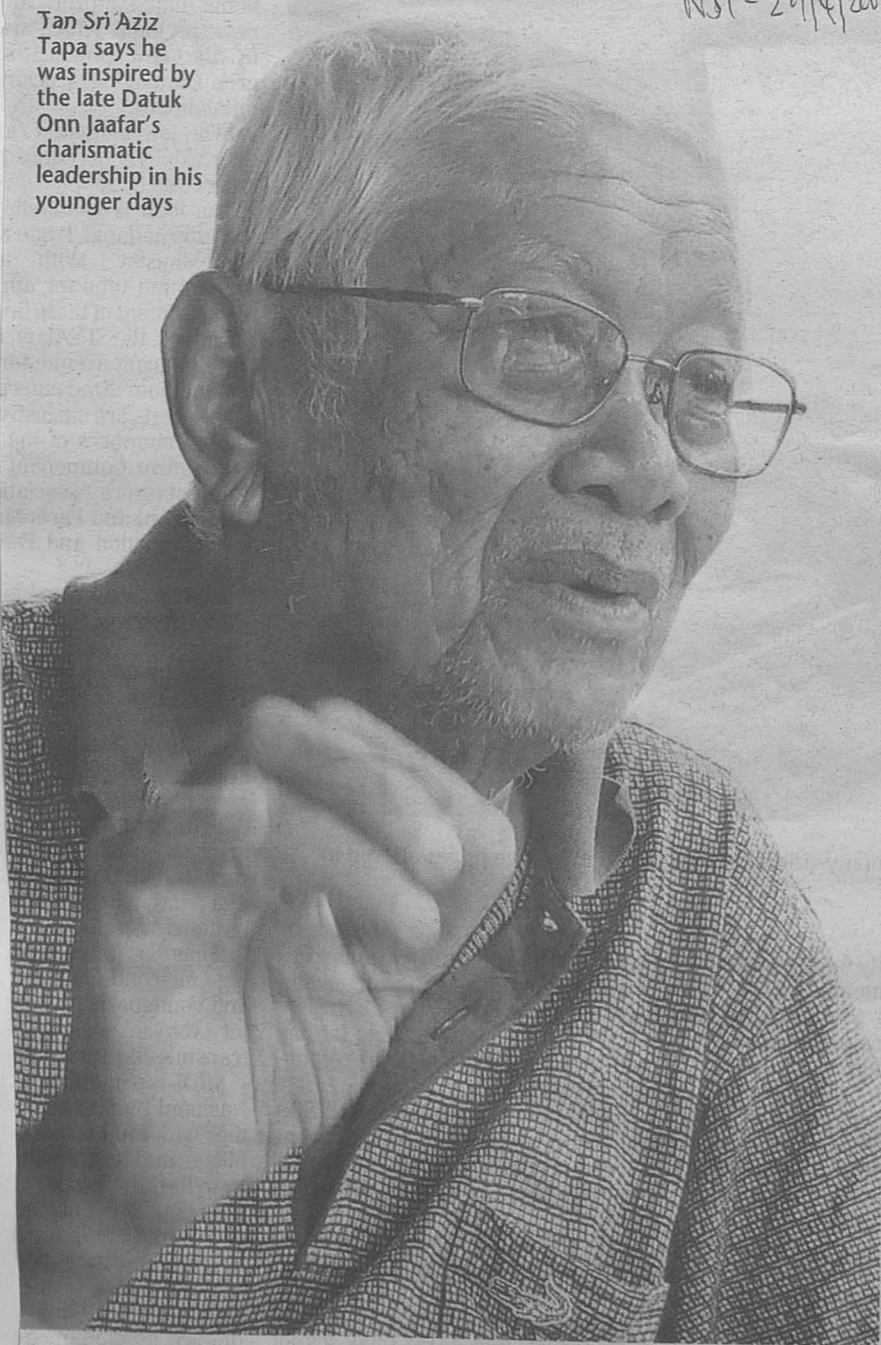


More passion for literature than politics



Known for his wit and love for *pantun*, Umno stalwart Tan Sri Abdul Aziz Tapa also has a serious side to his political face as P. SELVARANI discovers during a meeting with the octogenarian at his home in Kampung Rim, Jasin, Malacca

Tan Sri Aziz Tapa says he was inspired by the late Datuk Onn Jaafar's charismatic leadership in his younger days



Parti Kebangsaan Melayu Malaya and Parti Semenanjung Melayu Johor members were united in protesting against the Malayan Union although their nationalistic ideologies were different.

HE looked perplexed as he scratched his head, examining the dozens of medicine bottles and herbal supplements spread out on the coffee table.

Chuckling that he was an old man who needed his daily dose to "oil those creaky joints", he offered some hot tea and *kuih bahulu* and then excused himself as he proceeded to pop his pills.

Creaky joints or not, it is obvious that nationalism runs strong in the bones of Tan Sri Abdul Aziz Tapa, the 84-year-old Umno stalwart, as he spoke about the party, nationalism, the struggle for independence and his utmost respect for Umno's founding father, Datuk Onn Jaafar.

Born on June 13, 1923 in Kampung Rim, Jasin, to Minangkabau migrants Tapa Sahun and Putih Itnin, Aziz had his early education at Sekolah Melayu Jasin.

As his father wished, the young Aziz enrolled at the Sultan Idris Teachers Training College in Tanjung Malim in 1939.

World War Two disrupted his studies and when he returned to college, it was already a hotbed of Malay nationalism.

Aziz recalled how the spark of nationalism was further fuelled by the sneering remarks of the lecturers at the college.

"I remember our principal, O.T. Dussek, a Briton of German stock, would chide us, "Hey, *orang Melayu malas*' (hey, you lazy Malays), when he spotted us taking a break during gardening session.

"Actually, I think he had a soft spot for Malays and was merely trying to challenge us so that we would prove him wrong. I must say he did right."

Nationalism was already in full swing in Indonesia then, and Aziz and his contemporaries avidly read books written by Indonesian nationalists like Sukarno, Hatta, Agus Salim and Hamka.

After his training, Aziz served as a teacher in his hometown, where he was influenced by the anti-Malayan

Union sentiment of Parti Melayu Semenanjung Johor (PMSJ) led by Onn. He joined the party soon after it spread its wings to Jasin in 1945 when he was just 22.

A year later, Umno was formed at the Johor palace following the first Malay Congress at the Sultan Sulaiman Club in Kuala Lumpur. Aziz was among the first to join the party in Malacca, becoming the deputy Youth head in Jasin.

It was partly Onn's leadership which drew the young Aziz into politics.

"He was a charismatic leader whose loyalty to the rulers knew no bounds and it was this loyalty that attracted the people. Whenever he came to Malacca to campaign, I would make it a point to follow him.

"Even the women folk who rarely left their kitchens, left alone their homes, would come out to hear him speak."

What appealed to the people, says Aziz, was Datuk Onn's "Gandhian" approach in the fight for independence.

"This was very much in the style of the Malay culture and that was why he was accepted by the community."

Aziz says Onn always emphasised loyalty to king and country.

"This was important to Onn because you must remember that his father, Datuk Jaafar, was a former menteri besar who, together with Sultan Abu Bakar, formed the Johor government.

"You must understand that the loyalty of the Malays is to their ruler.

"So when Onn explained to the people that the Malayan Union would relegate the role of the Malay rulers to that of a *kadi*, the people got worked up. That was his style of campaigning and it worked."

Onn, says Aziz, did not subscribe to the style of confrontation and demonstration, unlike other nationalists like Dr Burhanuddin Helmi and Ahmad Boestamam, who formed Parti Kebangsaan Melayu Malaya (PKMM).

When the first Malay Congress was held, Aziz said PKMM wanted the Umno flag to be black and white, like the Indonesian flag.

"Although they opposed the Malayan Union, they were different in that they wanted to turn the country into a republic. But moderate nationalists like Zaaba and the association of teachers were solidly behind Onn in their support for Umno"

Aziz recalls how during one of Onn's campaigns in Jasin, someone had suggested that Umno buy a huge ship to "transport the Indians and Chinese back to where they came from" because they were brought in by *orang putih*.

"But Onn said no. He likened the Indians and Chinese to the *ciku* fruit, which is not native to Malaya.

"But because the people began to like it, they have accepted it as their own."

Aziz says he was reluctant to get actively involved in politics because "I am not a politician, I am a follower".

"I remained active only at the branch level because I did not harbour political ambitions. I felt it was better to champion the cause of the Malays through culture and literature."

Aziz did this through the Ikatan Persuratan Melayu, which had members even in London.

"We were actively trying to promote Bahasa Melayu as the national language and held the Malay Language Congress in Johor Baru, where a resolution was tabled to set up the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka."

The language congress was followed by the first Malay Culture Congress in December 1957 in Malacca.

And because he was busy preparing for the Malay Congress, Aziz was not actively involved in the preparations for Merdeka.

But what was the urgency for a congress on the Malay language and culture at a time

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Tan Sri Aziz Tapa

when independence was the paramount agenda?

"It was so that when we gained Independence, we would be ready," explains Aziz.

"There were enough people to fight for the Merdeka cause but as for championing our language and culture, the teachers came together for this."

Touching on his days as an elected representative, Aziz says there was a vast difference in how political campaigns were carried out.

"At times, eight of us would share a hotel room for RM4 a night, unlike now, where politicians stay in five-star hotels.

Aziz served as a state assemblyman in 1978 and there was a "drama" to that.

He was earlier offered a scholarship by the Australian High Commission to go on a one-month cultural study tour to Australia.

"My flight ticket was ready and when I informed (then Malacca chief minister) Datuk Seri Adib Adam about the trip, he told me I could not go.

"I asked him why, but he would not tell me. Shortly after that, I received a letter nominating me as a state assemblyman."

Despite being a "reluctant politician", Aziz held the post of Jasin Umno division deputy head from 1974 to 1979 and vice-head from 1982 to 1986.

He served as a senator from 1975 to 1977 and was Nyalas state assemblyman for two terms from 1978 till 1986.

During this time, he was made the Malacca state assembly speaker and state executive councillor in charge of education, culture, youth and sports.

He was Malacca Umno treasurer for 18 years, and is now the treasurer of the state Barisan Nasional.

After 50 years of independence, Aziz sees no end to his struggle for the nation and its people.

Till today, he gives talks to students and participates in forums and seminars which touch on nationalism and the struggle for independence.