

# Fresh interest in Malay studies

A lively discourse among 40 academics at the Britain and the Malay World Symposium in London, in conjunction with the 50th anniversary of Malaysia's Independence recently, shows that Malay studies is very much alive.

By WAN A. HULAIMI

A drizzly Malaysian morning on August 31, 1957, the single-most important day in the nation's post-colonial history, and what stuck in the mind of Russell Jones, 82, an old Malaysia hand, was the subdued tone of the celebration, just another day in Kuala Lumpur.

Jones, who was then working in the Immigration Department in Penang, went specially to Kuala Lumpur to be at Merdeka Stadium for the occasion.

"When we walked into Kuala Lumpur after the Merdeka declaration at the stadium, the Tunku's car drove past, but there was no cheering or an outward display of enthusiasm although the people were aware of the importance of the day," he recalled in impeccable Malay.

To Jones, that marked the temperament of a nation that had won Independence through peaceful means.

Jones stayed on at his post for another year before returning to London after 10 years of service in Malaya.

"I was eager to be back, to enrol as a student of Malay language and civilisation at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS)," he said.

He stayed on at the school after graduation to become a leading academic and one of the world's authorities on the Malay language.

Jones was speaking at the two-day symposium on Britain and the Malay World at the Royal Asiatic



*Malaysiaku Gemilang*

Society (RAS) in London on May 17.

"We planned the symposium to coincide with the 50th anniversary of Malaysia's Independence when I was in Kuala Lumpur three years ago," said Ben Murtagh, one of the organisers of the symposium.

Murtagh, who is also lecturer at the Indonesian/Malay department of the SOAS spoke of problems facing language studies in Britain where students are now attracted more by the career opportunities offered by business studies or economics than the lure of languages.

On his field of Indonesian/Malay studies he struck an optimistic note: "Most of the 40 or so experts on the Malay world here come from Britain. It shows that the field of Malay studies here is still very much alive," he said.

This view was echoed by Prof Ulrich Kratz, also of the SOAS, who presented the first day's plenary lecture entitled "Malay Studies 50 Years On".

"Fifty years ago, most foreign students doing Malay studies were



**Jones:** World authority on the Malay language

from Britain or the Netherlands, but now it is becoming more international," he said.

Papers presented over the two days of the symposium reflected the diversity of these interests. There was a paper and video presentation by journalist and SOAS postgraduate Zaharah Othman on Malay sailors who had carved a niche for themselves in Liverpool, Cardiff and London and raised the profile of Malaya in the 50s; and a paper on how the British represented Malays in their propaganda films by Hassan Abdul Muthalib, formerly of the Malaysian Film Unit.

Both presenters used film footage

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and musical soundtracks to great effect to break the gravitas of papers such as the study of the *Undang-Undang Melaka* and the *Undang-Undang Laut* (The Malacca and Maritime codes) by Russian Malay scholar Svetlana Tchor and a paper on R. J. Wilkinson and his views of traditional Malay literature by Professor Vladimir Braginsky.

The film and its lore gained as much attention here as other areas of Malay and Malaysian studies. Dr Timothy Barnard (National University of Singapore) gave an entertaining talk and video presentation on the decolonisation of Malay films 1955-64, while the Baba sisters Shuhaimi (film director and producer) and Datuk Zawiyah (Atma, UKM) collaborated on "1957, a cinematic interpretation of Malaya's struggle for Independence, a Malaysian perspective."

Annabel Gallop of the British Library highlighted curious and unexpected uses of Western legal terms in early documents in her paper "After Wilkinson: Notes on Malay Documents." She said after the symposium that in the last 50 years the British Library had acquired about 10 more Malay manuscripts for its wide collection.

"Among the most important of these is the *Hikayat Raja Pasai*. There are only two such manuscripts in existence, and the one in the British Library is the oldest in the world," she said.

The subject of foreign manuscripts in British repositories has

been a controversial one. Now the British Library has a different policy on foreign manuscript purchases.

"I receive many e-mails from Malaysia offering to sell manuscripts but we at the British Library are no longer purchasers of manuscripts from Malaysia or Indonesia. I always suggest that the manuscripts should remain in Malaysia," she said.

Looking at the scope of our written word that are kept in libraries in London, Professor Muhammad Haji Salleh of UKM struck a very personal note.

"Whenever I'm here, I go to the museums and the British Library. The funny thing is that I discover myself here in our manuscripts. There are many extraordinary things there, and they are extraordinary not from the standpoint of a nationalist interested in Malayness and Malay literature but for me as someone from a background of English literature: when I see the *Sejarah Melayu* (the Malay Annals) I say, 'This is a work of genius'. This is from the perspective of English literature, not from the viewpoint of a Malay."

Professor Muhammad, who presented a symposium paper comparing colonial and post-colonial narratives on writers on Pahang, earlier took issue in a discussion on a remark by British administrator-scholar R.J. Wilkinson (1867-1941) that Malay literature was 'pompous'.

"I do not find that it is as pompous as say, Pope, for instance," he pointed out. — MPS