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# Crafting the nation of Malaysia

## GHAZALI MEMOIR:

Understanding how Malaysia came into being

**I** USUALLY begin my Malaysian Studies class on the two levels of approaches in conceiving the nation-state — the concrete and the abstract. Neither is unproblematic.

There are many instances of the name "Malaysia" used in books and other documents in the 1800s and 1900s before Malaysia became a nation. Generally, the meaning embraces insular Southeast Asia from Sumatra to the Philippines and the Malay peninsula.

It is not every day that we find geographical space being defined and manoeuvred along numerous configurations — among others, ideology, colonial presence, ethnicity, language spoken and oral traditions, cultural practices and a collective memory. And it is not every day that one is provided with the opportunity to craft and make nation-states. The birth of the nation, and especially as to its territorial configuration, needs to be continuously con-

sumed, understood and celebrated.

I found Ghazali Shafie's *Memoir on the Formation of Malaysia* (1998) a pertinent text on the story of Malaysia. It is the story of the nation — through "the rare opportunity" as Ghazali put it — to participate directly in charting its course.

The young Ghazali, while a law student at the University College of Wales in Aberystwyth, between 1948 and 1951 began to think of a greater union comprising the states of the Federation of Malaya, Singapore, Sarawak, Brunei and North Borneo. He chose to study ancient Welsh law with a view to comparing it with other legal systems.

We are reminded that before 1948, there was no country strictly called Malaya but a territory of nine sultanates as British Protectorates and three Straits Settlements as Crown Colonies. In reading the memoir, I tend to belabour the genesis of his thought and imagination — the junctures at which he crossed paths with destiny.

In Part One, titled "Genesis", Ghazali projected his insights in the years before Malaysia, the nation-state. He recalled, "I had become acutely sensitive at that time to the fact that at least I had a country called Tanah Melayu or Malaya whereas before I was only a citizen of the



Tun Muhammad Ghazali Shafie's *'Memoir on the Formation of Malaysia'* should be read by all Malaysians.

state of Pahang."

He was conscious that with the formation of the Federation of Malaya, "I had become a citizen of Malaya, a much bigger unit than Pahang".

He arrived in London in August 1948. There, he met Tunku Abdul Rahman and Abdul Razak Hussein (later Tun). They formed a fraternity for the independence of Malaya, "now that we had a country known as the Persekutuan Tanah Melayu since February 1948".

"I could not erase the thought of a greater federation involving the 11 states of the Federation with Singapore, Sarawak, Brunei and North Borneo would be desirable and viable for the benefit

of the people."

The concept of this "togetherness", as Ghazali described it, became almost an obsession. He recalled that "I could not suggest a name for it" but wrote in the *Straits Times* of the desirability of a commonwealth of Southeast Asia.

The origins of "Malaysia" is a subject for the history of ideas. Instrumental to Ghazali's worldview was living through colonialism, and the people he met.

Ghazali learnt that to the British Colonial Office, governing Malaya was extremely cumbersome, with many semi-independent states in the Malay peninsula and the Borneo territories. The Malay rulers' sovereignty was never diminished. There were treaty relations and

"not a relationship based on one of conqueror-vanquished as upheld by the British judiciary".

Ghazali had in mind to call such an association or federation of states the Federation of Malaysia, where the states joined in "partnership on a footing something like that which exists between the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland". He argued that "we are linked to the Borneo territories not only by proximity and close association, but also because the Borneo territories have the same types of culture and racial origins as Malaysians". He refuted suggestions that the Malaysia concept was an attempt to colonise.

Tun Muhammad Ghazali Shafie died on Jan 24, 2010. He was minister of home affairs from 1973 to 1981, and minister of foreign affairs for three years from 1981.

I first met Ghazali at Wisma Putra as a cadet journalist with Bernama in 1981. It was during a courtesy call by US Senator S.I. Hayakawa, who was a scholar of linguistics.

Ghazali's *Memoir* should remain accessible to all. It went for a second printing in 2004. The problem is even the paperback version is not accessible. Such works should be reformatted and reduced in size, displayed in retail outlets. I suggest the publisher re-launch the memoir. In the memoir, "Malaysia" is not just a word, the name of a nation state or territory. It has lexical ramifications, meaning and contexts. It has semantics.