
Positionality With a Cause

IDHAM BACHTIAR SETIADI

National University of Singapore

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Idham Bachtiar Setiadi is a PhD student at the National University of Singapore. He previously trained as an anthropologist at Universitas Indonesia. Currently, he conducts research in Borobudur where he focuses on the relations between the production of historical images and notions of time (idham.setiadi@nus.edu.sg).

Editor's Note:

This article commemorates Professor Syed Hussein Alatas (1928-2007). Dr. Alatas was a former Professor in Malay Studies at the University of Singapore and a leading intellectual in Southeast Asian Studies.

Born in Bogor, Indonesia, he graduated from the University of Amsterdam and worked as a lecturer to the Department of Malay Studies at the University of Malaya. He founded the “*Gerakan*” party was also active in politics during the late 1960s and 70s. He was also the Head of the Department of Malay Studies at the National University of Singapore from 1967 to 1988 and in 1988 became the Vice Chancellor of the University of Malaya.

Among his important works is the still highly influential book titled “The Myth of the Lazy Native” published in 1977. The work is seen a major contribution that led to the development of new understandings in the construction of Malay identity and more importantly, addressed the dangers of the Eurocentric nature of the production of knowledge. His ideas provided great inspiration to many and laid the foundations for the development of post-colonial studies in Southeast Asia.

Positionality with a Cause

During the first Southeast Asian Young Scholars Workshop at NUS, organized by Professor Iletto and Dr. Goh Beng Lan in November 2004, we had a moving experience with Professor Alatas. Sitting at one table with the giants of Southeast Asian scholarship, we discussed possibilities and directions, but also challenges and threats, in the future of knowledge production about Southeast Asian scholarship by Southeast Asians. In particular, we discussed how can one sustain this dream given limited resources, and shifting individual and institutional priorities.

Our workshop formulated the question in a different and, at least to myself and my fellow junior scholars, far more digestible way. Students and scholars I collaborated with asked: “would continuity develop if young Southeast Asian scholars became acquainted with the ideas, or rather questions, and the life-histories behind those questions of Southeast Asian pioneers of Southeast Asian studies?”

Positionality – the stance and ideology one operates within – was central to our line of inquiry, even more so when we realized that young scholars possessed such different academic backgrounds, life experiences, and approaches towards their roles as scholars in Southeast Asian societies. It seemed that generational issues such

as the cold war, decolonization, and so on, drew the pioneers of Southeast Asian studies together, while contemporary issues like direct foreign investment, Asian values, and so on drove the young scholars apart. Where was the continuity?

But then, there was Professor Alatas. He stood out first as the oldest pioneer and the only sociologist among the many historians and few anthropologists in the workshop. More importantly, he stood out because of his critique, not about governments and governance or Western academics and knowledge production, but about society.

Professor Alatas spoke about his life, his “enlightenment” and research; about his travels and experiences in the worlds of Dutch *ethnologie*, Indonesian *sosiologi*, and Malayan *politik*, and about his lifelong struggle against corruption. He provided an example of taking up a non-combative style of arguing, of pursuing the truth about an important matter that to many of his fellow countrymen and women was superfluous. In the workshop he seemed like Gandalf the Grey in the land of Hobbits – a giant, not yet white and all powerful, but witty, persuasive, path-breaking, full of courage and driven by a cause.

Many of us young scholars, to dramatize the comparison, were not really interested in studying corruption. Corruption seemed to many of us like a necessary evil: it was there before we were born, it was there when we grew up, and it was in the news too many times to believe that critical thinking about corruption would help. Too many times we heard that it was hopeless to fight corruption by studying it. Too many times we were told that political action was needed, now more than ever. So, in November 2004, we were sitting in the Faculty Lounge, waiting for Professor Alatas to either prove to us that knowledge helps to take a political stance against corrupt regimes or, even better, showing us an example of doing so. Such a presentation would have made the day in that workshop for young Southeast Asian scholars.

However, what Professor Alatas did was far from fueling our desire to fight. Rather, he explained that his passion for the study of corruption came about during the war of the 1940s. Then he realized two things: firstly, he saw that corrupt people are not always the powerful ones, and that corruption can become even worse when the powerful have gone – that corruption

is more related to the process of enacting power rather than power itself; and, secondly, that the initial information needed to understand that process was in books, stored away in the inaccessible bookshelves of Dutch officials. This revelation, however, was not really surprising – as he wrote extensively about it.

What was really unexpected was his story about his decision to take the long route, to go to the sources of the books, to study in the Netherlands, to become a scholar rather than a politician. A decision that led him to think about scholarship, about the role of scholars in society, about the political engagement of researchers, and about the effects of scholarly studies on real things in the bigger world. Here he recalled a story about a scholar who was locked away in a harem, yet her thoughts travelled far beyond the iron bars and walls of the cozy prison. Why would he position himself in such a way? Why was he seeing Southeast Asian scholars playing the subversive role of social critics?

The easy answer was of course it is better to be subversive rather than submissive. Yet, this does not fully grasp the notion Professor Alatas was making, since he linked the act of criticizing society with the style of arguing in a non-combative way. “What good would a blatant, straightforward critic do to change society?” he asked, and added that this should be the first question to be tackled when writing down a piece of research. How effective would be an open debate that, when boiled down to the “essence” of the exchange, only hardens the positions of the speakers rather than helping them to join forces to change society?

When I read Professor Alatas’ *Intellectuals in Developing Societies*,¹ published in 1977, this was not so clear. Then I had the impression that Professor Alatas was essentializing scholars as agents of change. Yet, by learning about Professor Alatas’ central questions in his career, I found a new definition of scholars as agents of change. It now seems that the key to understand *Intellectuals in Developing Societies* is the role of intellectuals in developing societies, in particular times and places: it was because of the intellectuals’ inability to generate a community in Malaysia after independence that the book was written in the first place. Professor Alatas outlined the “threats” of scholarship, which to him are: *bebalisma*, that is stupidity, indolence and stubbornness as well as backward elites, and intellectual inertia. He urged scholars in developing

societies to cope with these threats by developing a non-combative approach of critique. He said:

It seems to me that the only way ... for the intellectuals in periods of routine life [is] to prove their own necessity by writing, publishing, lecturing, organizing small group meetings, and tackling hitherto neglected problems in a manner which is not in conflict with the specialists or the technocrats.²

Professor Alatas' positionality was clear and the cause of taking his particular position was just. He did not need grand theories or sophisticated academic instruments to see through the events of the 1940s. What he needed the scientific method for was, in our impression of the brief encounter with this "grey giant" of Southeast Asian scholarship, to find a good way to sharpen, broaden, and convey his consciousness.

Professor Alatas had a good cause to rebel - not only against governments, academic disciplines, and schools of thought, but also, and perhaps more importantly, against society. He marched on even when corruption had become a "dated" concept, but in a non-combative way. He had a just cause. He was a scientist and an intellectual. Most importantly, he was an individual who stood out amidst the native pioneers of Southeast Asian Studies through the approach, integrity and honesty that characterized his life and his work.

Endnotes

1 Alatas, Syed Hussein, *Intellectuals in Developing Societies*, London: Frank Cass, 1977.

2 *Ibid*, p. 74.