

Ungku Omar's Intellectualism (1931–1969) in Developing the Malay Nation: A Preliminary Review

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ABSTRACT

Ungku Omar (1931–1969) was one of the prominent early intellectuals during the post-independence period of Malaya, to the extent that his name has been immortalized in educational institutions such as Polytechnic Ungku Omar, Ungku Omar Residential College at University Kebangsaan Malaysia, and Ungku Omar Residential College at University Pendidikan Sultan Idris. Nevertheless, his intellectual legacy remains largely overlooked and underexplored in contemporary scholarly discourse. Present-day generations often recognize his name merely as a label attached to academic institutions, without more profound awareness of his critical contributions and intellectual vision in advancing the Malay nation. This study aims to examine Ungku Omar's intellectualism and his contributions to national development, particularly in the fields of education and public health. Additionally, the research highlights his pioneering efforts in the Islamization of knowledge, reflecting his commitment to integrating religion and science in a harmonious framework. Employing a qualitative approach, this study analyzes both primary and secondary sources, with document analysis conducted to verify the authenticity of data and assess the factual accuracy of the narratives presented. The findings indicate that Ungku Omar's intellectualism played a significant role in strengthening the competitiveness of the Malay community and served as a catalyst for national transformation and the Islamization of knowledge.

Keywords: Intellectualism, Scholar, Independence, Ideas, Science

INTRODUCTION

The Malay community in the early years of independence faced a challenging landscape, marked by underdevelopment, limited infrastructure, and a lack of resources necessary to drive the national and societal agenda forward. Ungku Omar emerged as one of the pivotal intellectual figures who championed the cause of the Malay people, particularly through contributions in health, education, and national development. His leadership in advancing the well-being of the Malays during this period is best reflected in his guiding principle: "Health is progress; without health, there can be no advancement." In this regard, his intellectual vision was centered on realizing the aspirations of the nation through science and technology, the empowerment of the Malay language, and the upliftment of the Malay community. He displayed a profound concern for public health and was vocal in addressing the economic underdevelopment of the Malay population.

Ungku Omar's intellect and expertise were effectively leveraged through scholarly writings and public lectures across the country. Despite his aristocratic lineage, he remained humble, selfless, and deeply committed to the struggles of his people. His humility was evident in his readiness to forgo privilege and social status to serve rural communities, often visiting villages to deliver talks on health and hygiene practices (Mohd Zamberi, 2012). He frequently conducted field visits to observe firsthand the socioeconomic conditions, lifestyle patterns, and environmental realities of rural communities reflecting his deep-rooted commitment to the welfare of a society grappling with backwardness. Therefore, this study seeks to examine Ungku Omar's intellectual contributions to nation-building, particularly in the domains of education and public health. Furthermore, it explores his efforts toward the Islamization of knowledge through the integration of religious values and scientific thought.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies on the theme of intellectualism represent an effort to explore the thoughts of influential individuals concerning concepts, philosophies, and the significance of the intellectual tradition. Intellectualism refers to the attributes or tendencies of individuals endowed with knowledge and expertise, either within their specialized field or beyond (Khairiah, 2018). Broadly speaking, intellectualism involves the utilization of knowledge, education, national consciousness, and critical discourse to shape public thought—a domain often associated with the roles of scholars (ulama'), literary figures, and national leaders.

The emergence of Western ideologies such as secularism and modernism in Malaya posed a serious threat to indigenous epistemologies and created confusion in the understanding of knowledge, development, and education. As a response, the Islamization of knowledge was proposed as a necessary framework to restore the dignity and rightful status of Islamic knowledge. According to Nurul Athirah Nordin & Nur Farhana Abdul Rahman (2023), Islamization of knowledge is a systematic endeavor to deconstruct knowledge from Western secular influences by reassessing its content through a holistic and tawhidic Islamic worldview.

Within the discourse of intellectualism in relation to the development of the Malay nation—especially in the Islamization of knowledge—Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas is frequently recognized as a pioneering figure, followed by Ismail al-Faruqi, who proposed structured plans for Islamization. This agenda was also advanced by Sayyed Hossein Nasr, who focused on historical themes within Islamic civilization and the philosophy of science. The same trajectory is evident in the works of Osman Bakar, Mat Rofa Ismail, and Abdul Latif Samian, who collectively contributed to this intellectual tradition (Muhammad Alinor, 2008). However, the name Ungku Omar remains relatively absent from mainstream narratives despite his early contributions to the Islamization of knowledge.

Nearly 43 years after Ungku Omar's passing, efforts have been made to revisit his legacy. Mohd Zamberi (2012) explored his life journey, career, and intellectual contributions toward the advancement of the Malay people. This theme was further developed by Hazwani Che Ab Rahman and Nazri Muslim (2023), who highlighted Ungku Omar's intellectualism in the domains of education, health, and his proposal for the establishment of an Islamic university to meet the needs of the Malay community. Although the establishment of the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) is commonly attributed to the First World Conference on Islamic Education in Makkah in 1977, based on the ideas of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas (1973), historical records indicate that Ungku Omar had already proposed the concept of an Islamic university as early as 1967 as part of his vision to uphold Islam through education in Malaysia.

This critical literature reveals that, while Ungku Omar's contributions to science and medicine are generally acknowledged, the intellectual dimension of his legacy remains underexplored in contemporary discourses on Malay nation-building. Hence, this study seeks to revitalize his ideas, particularly in the areas of education, public health, and the integration of religion and science. Ungku Omar's intellectualism is a vital legacy that deserves renewed scholarly attention in fostering a national spirit grounded in knowledge, ethics, and social consciousness for the development of the Malay nation.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research methodology is a critical element in any scholarly inquiry, serving to collect, organize, and evaluate data to achieve predetermined objectives. According to the Kamus Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (2010), methodology is defined as a system that encompasses the methods and principles employed in an activity, as well as the discipline used to administer it in pursuit of its intended goals. This study adopts a qualitative approach to gather information, data, and reference materials from reliable sources. As noted by Crawford and Irving (2009), the qualitative approach is considered suitable for exploratory research.

This study employs document analysis and content analysis as its primary methods. Document analysis involves examining facts obtained from previous research, while content analysis refers to a systematic and objective description of explicit communication content that has been printed or broadcast (Sabitha, 2005). The data is gathered through an in-depth review of books, theses, dissertations, journals, and relevant academic studies.

Content analysis is utilized to interpret information explicitly conveyed in these texts (Ahmad Munawar Ismail & Mohd Nor Shahizan Ali, 2020).

The collected data is analyzed using both inductive and deductive methods. The inductive method involves describing, analyzing, and drawing conclusions from specific data to derive general truths and validate facts. The deductive method, on the other hand, is used to draw conclusions by analyzing data through logical reasoning from general statements to specific observations. In this study, the deductive approach is applied through a general theoretical framework, which is then followed by specific observations of Ungku Omar's intellectual contributions to nation-building particularly in the fields of education, health, and the Islamization of knowledge.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Ungku Omar bin Ungku Ahmad was born in Johor Bahru and hailed from the royal lineage of the Johor Sultanate. He was born on 18 January 1931 and began his early education at the age of six, attending both Malay-medium schools and religious schools in various towns including Kluang, Segamat, Pontian, and Tangkak. His frequent school transfers were due to his father's occupational responsibilities as an Assistant District Officer. He was later accepted into the Government English School in Kluang after successfully completing the Special Malay Class. In the afternoons, he pursued religious education, which eventually qualified him to become a religious teacher. Additionally, during the Japanese occupation of Malaya, he attended a school with Japanese as the medium of instruction. As a result, he gained proficiency in Nippon-Go as well as in Katakana, Hiragana, and Kanji scripts (Hazwani Che Ab Rahman & Nazri Muslim, 2023).

In 1945, he continued his education at the English College in Johor Bahru. Two years later, in 1947, he became one of the pioneering students in the science stream at the Malay College Kuala Kangsar (MCKK) in Perak. MCKK significantly influenced and shaped Ungku Omar's intellectual perspective on key issues relating to national development, particularly in education and politics, ultimately moulding him into a distinguished individual. In 1952, he was offered the opportunity to pursue medical studies at the University of Malaya in Singapore, and in 1957, he graduated with a Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery (M.B.B.S) degree (Siti Haniza, 2021).

According to Mohd Zamberi (2012), Ungku Omar began his career in August 1957, immediately after completing his studies, with a one-year housemanship at the Johor Bahru General Hospital. On 1 August 1958, he was appointed as a Medical and Research Officer at the Institute for Medical Research (IMR) in Kuala Lumpur. At that time, IMR was predominantly led by Europeans. Nevertheless, Ungku Omar's excellence and credibility as a Malay medical professional became evident, and he took on the responsibility of advancing the Malay community through health, medicine, and education.

His intellectual brilliance, which had been recognised since his school years, earned him the Wise and Bulter Award for excellence in History, Malay Language, and English Language. In 1961, he furthered his studies in London and obtained a postgraduate Diploma in Pathology from both the Royal College of Physicians London and the Royal College of Surgeons England in 1962. In 1963, he continued his Master's studies in Biochemistry while also serving as a part-time medical lecturer. By 1964, he was appointed Senior Registrar in the Department of Pathology at the Royal Free Hospital, School of Medicine, London, and became a member of the College of Pathologists, London.

His academic pursuit did not stop there. In 1965, he was awarded a Doctorate (Ph.D.) in Clinical Chemistry from the Faculty of Medicine, with a thesis entitled "Electrolytes In Isolated Human Leucocytes." Remarkably, he completed the thesis in just 27 months, and it remains a reference for medical students at the University of London to this day (Mohd Zamberi, 2012). In March 1965, Ungku Omar returned to Malaysia and resumed service in the Disease Research Division, where he was ranked as the second most senior official after the Director of IMR.

On 1 December 1965, he was officially appointed as the 16th Director of IMR, becoming the first Malay to hold the institution's highest position. Under his leadership, numerous initiatives and strategic plans were introduced

to transform IMR into an active, productive, and globally recognised research institution. His vision extended beyond the laboratory, championing the welfare of society through advancements in health, education, and development. On 15 February 1969, at the young age of 38, Ungku Omar passed away, leaving behind a wife and five children (Hazwani Che Ab Rahman & Nazri Muslim, 2023).

Ungku Omar's Intellectualism in the Development of the Malay Nation

Ungku Omar's life, deeply rooted in his commitment to education and pioneering efforts in advancing the Malay community in the field of medicine, shaped an intellectual vision focused on nation-building, particularly in the areas of health and education. Here is a summary of his contributions:

Health

Health is a fundamental pillar in building a competitive and progressive nation, especially in the face of ever-growing challenges. In Islam, health is highly prioritized to achieve human perfection. This is evident through numerous Quranic verses and Hadiths that emphasize the significance of human well-being. Poor health affects individual productivity and, by extension, national development (Nur Yazira Hamsan, 2014). Therefore, the health sector must be prioritized in all efforts toward human development.

Muhammad Hilmi Jalil and Fakhru Adabi Abdul Kadir (2013) argue that good health is a core element of human development, as it enables individuals to fully realize their potential. Conversely, poor health hampers self-development efforts. As such, maintaining physical health is an essential prerequisite for every individual. A healthy lifestyle entails meeting three material needs—nutrition, clothing, and shelter—to support physical well-being and ensure a productive and balanced life (Stella Van, 1947).

Driven by this understanding, Ungku Omar sought to address the socioeconomic backwardness of the Malay community, which was largely due to their unproductive role in the economy and widespread poverty. The legacy of colonialism had entrenched underdevelopment among the Malays, a challenge inherited by the post-independence government after 1957 (Nurdiyawati Abidin & Adnan Jusoh, 2021). Factors such as lack of education, cultural traditions, religious misconceptions, and environmental conditions were the root causes of Malays' poor health. Thus, it was imperative to raise awareness among Malays regarding the importance of health to escape poverty and live a better life.

One of Ungku Omar's key initiatives was conducting research on rural health standards. This was reflected in his paper "Health Conditions in Rural Areas Are Crucial for Development in All Fields" (1967), presented at the Symposium on Rural Population Issues at the University of Malaya. He highlighted alarmingly high rural mortality rates due to diseases such as cholera, malaria, elephantiasis, worms, and tuberculosis. These findings were further presented in his paper, "Medical and Health Problems Associated with Socio-economic Development of Rural Areas in Tropical Malaysia," in Bangkok, Thailand (Hazwani Che Ab Rahman & Nazri Muslim, 2023). His work also raised awareness about the ineffectiveness of traditional healing methods like incantations while advocating for the adoption of modern medical practices.

Ungku Omar also disseminated health information through newspapers and magazines. According to Wan Noorlizawati Wan Mat Ali et al. (2021), the media played a crucial role in informing, analyzing, and evaluating societal issues. His article "The Malay Language in the Field of Health, Medicine, and Hospitals" was published in *Dewan Bahasa* magazine in 1958. Furthermore, Ungku Omar contributed to the compilation of medical terminology, which was later published in a Malay-language medical dictionary. This effort not only made health knowledge accessible to rural populations but also expanded the use of Malay in scientific discourse, traditionally dominated by English (Mohd Zamberi, 2012).

In 1960, Ungku Omar worked with the University of Malaya's Medical Committee, the Medical Terminology Board, the National Language Implementation Committee, and the Ministry of Health to designate a National Language Week. This initiative aligned with the concept of "Language is the soul of a nation," promoting the use of Malay in healthcare communication between medical personnel and patients (Hazwani Che Ab Rahman & Nazri Muslim, 2023).

His push to champion the Malay language was a direct response to the dominance of English in scientific fields, which left the Malay community marginalized. Promoting the use of Malay in health discourse was essential for ensuring that rural populations received accurate information. However, this effort faced challenges, particularly as English continued to be the primary language of instruction in scientific education.

According to Mohd Zamberi (2012), Ungku Omar also utilized radio broadcasts between 1958 and 1961 to deliver public health messages. Although his target audience was the rural population, the initiative was less effective due to poverty—many households could not afford radios. As a solution, he deployed health officers to rural communities to conduct face-to-face awareness sessions, ensuring critical information reached even the illiterate population.

In addition, Ungku Omar restructured the role of the Institute for Medical Research (IMR) through a five-year vision plan, aiming to establish IMR as a national laboratory services reference center. He sent scientists and doctors abroad for specialized training to address the shortage of medical professionals. These efforts strengthened IMR's capacity to handle rural health crises, such as malaria outbreaks. Eventually, IMR gained international recognition and hosted numerous global seminars. As a result, improved rural health conditions paved the way for better educational access, uplifting the quality of life in those areas.

Education

Prior to independence, education was not considered essential by rural communities, who prioritized basic survival needs like food. Recognizing the power that transforms education, Ungku Omar developed strategies to uplift the Malay community through educational reform. According to him (1967), national progress depends on both physical vitality and intellectual capability. Poor health would inevitably hinder educational success. He supported this claim with a 1967 study revealing that only 10 out of every 100 students reached the Malaysian Certificate of Education (SPM) level, with most securing only third-grade results and showing weaknesses in key subjects. This underperformance was closely tied to poor health in rural areas, which accounted for 90% of educational failure.

Education has a significant impact on shaping human lives and providing access to job opportunities. It is a determining factor in one's life trajectory (Samruhaizad Samian @ Samion & Azahan Awang, 2017). Hence, producing a skilled and competitive Malay workforce became a priority. Education is also crucial in managing quality of life, as both economic and social status are heavily dependent on educational attainment. Conversely, lack of education perpetuates poverty (Affizal Ahmad, 2008).

The educational gap among Malays was alarming. Ungku Omar (1966) noted that Malay students were underrepresented in science and technology courses in higher education between 1959 and 1966. This lack of representation was largely due to the dominance of English in these fields, which many Malay students struggled to master. To address this, he worked on translating medical textbooks into Malay to foster a knowledgeable Malay generation and reduce reliance on Malay-language newspapers as their only information source.

Moreover, Ungku Omar played a critical role in the establishment of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). As chairman of the administrative subcommittee, he was directly involved in drafting the foundation of UKM, which would go on to preserve the use of Malay as its medium of instruction. His 1967 proposal perfectly encapsulated his vision:

"I see two pathways for students educated in the Malay medium to enter higher education. The first is to establish another university in Malaysia with its autonomy, using the Malay (national) language as the medium of instruction..."

Unfortunately, he did not live to witness its realization. UKM was officially established on 18 May 1970 to serve the interests of the Malay community and elevate the Malay language. The success of his vision is evident in UKM's ability to produce hundreds of medical doctors, scientists, and technologists educated in Malay. Some have become specialists, astronauts, Langkawi Award recipients, corporate leaders, and globally successful entrepreneurs (Shamsul Amri Baharuddin, 2014).

Ungku Omar also initiated a training program for medical laboratory technologists through the proposed establishment of the Medical and Health Laboratory Technology Training School. This initiative received funding not only from the Malaysian government but also from international health organizations such as the Sanpo Electrical and Mechanical Engineering Corporation (SEAMEC) and the World Health Organization (WHO). The program aimed to produce qualified graduates who met medical industry standards (Hazwani Che Ab Rahman & Nazri Muslim, 2023).

Despite his scientific background, Ungku Omar's writings on education have not gained significant attention, particularly from those interested in the Islamization of knowledge. Nonetheless, his ideas remain relevant for today's Malay community, offering a balanced educational vision that integrates scientific excellence with the dignified use of the Malay language as the national medium of instruction

Islamization of Knowledge Through the Integration of Religion and Science

The secular nature of modern education has led to significant distortions in the national education system. According to Shamsul Amri (2011), Stamford Raffles was a pioneering scholar in introducing the foundational framework of colonial knowledge during the early phase of British rule in Malaya. This introduction of colonial epistemology resulted in the segregation of knowledge, particularly sidelining religious education, which had previously been a core and compulsory subject. This situation was recognized by Ungku Omar, who advocated for the Islamization of knowledge—even though the term itself had yet to be coined at that time. He believed that a comprehensive Islamization of knowledge would give rise to *insan kamil* (the ideal human being).

Mohd Farhan Abd Rahman et al. (2017) argue that the implementation of the secular education system clearly marginalized the spirit and tradition of Islam. This is evident in the removal of subjects previously considered central to education, as well as the abandonment of Jawi script, which had long served as a medium for Islamic scholarship and tradition in the Malay Archipelago. In response, Ungku Omar restructured the curriculum of Islamic colleges by integrating science and mathematics subjects. This curricular reform aimed to produce graduates well-versed in both *naqli* (revealed knowledge) and *aqli* (rational knowledge).

He proposed establishing an Islamic university to meet the linguistic and intellectual needs of the Malay community. Alongside Malay, he recommended that Arabic and English also be used as instructional languages, similar to practices at the University of Malaya. This proposal sought to elevate the socioeconomic standing of the Malay people, who were then marginalized within the national education system. The Islamization of knowledge entails a purification process of existing knowledge; particularly intellectual traditions derived from the West that contain foreign and often negative elements. This process involves critical separation and filtering before such knowledge is recontextualized and infused with Islamic concepts and values. Consequently, knowledge is not only purified epistemologically but also revitalized in line with the Islamic worldview, thus becoming true knowledge (Che Haslina Abdullah, 2004).

According to Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, the intellectual crisis facing the Muslim world stems from confusion in understanding knowledge, development, and education. He argues that fragmentation and confusion can be resolved only through intellectual unity among Muslim scholars regarding key concepts tied to Islam and Islamic civilization (Adam Badhrulhisham & Mohamad Firdaus Mohd Isa, 2017). Ungku Omar's efforts toward the Islamization of knowledge were therefore manifested through the integration of religion and science. He often drew inspiration from the intellectual flourishing of the Abbasid era as a model for reforming education among the Malays. The scientific advancements enjoyed by the Malay community were, in his view, the fruit of earlier Islamic scholarly achievements (Hazwani Che Ab Rahman & Nazri Muslim, 2023).

Although a scholar in the field of pure science, Ungku Omar was highly conscious of the need to harmonize scientific knowledge with other disciplines, aligning them within an Islamic framework (Mohd Zamberi, 2012). This awareness stemmed from his early education in Islamic religious schools. As a result, he initiated steps toward the Islamization of knowledge through his writing titled "The Concept of an Islamic University in Malaysia." In this work, he proposed that an Islamic university should not be limited to teaching *naqli* knowledge but should also offer courses in *aqli* fields such as science, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, and engineering. He believed Islam was not just a religion but a civilization and a comprehensive way of life that encourages

continuous self-improvement.

Furthermore, Ungku Omar stipulated that students using English as their medium of instruction should be required to take Arabic and Islamic civilization as core subjects in the Islamic university. This requirement not only ensured that students embodied Islamic values but also equipped them to assess other fields of knowledge through an Islamic lens, thereby fostering the development of the insan kamil. In addition, he promoted the use of Malay and worked to compile scientific terminology across the Malay Archipelago. This initiative was a form of Islamization, as the Malay language had historically undergone an Islamization process, becoming a medium for religious instruction, cultural development, and civilization-building (Wan Mohd Nor, 2005).

Ungku Omar's intellectual approach to the Islamization of knowledge deserves greater recognition by contemporary scholars. His ideas on this subject predated those of Sayyed Hossein Nasr (1968), who outlined the theoretical and practical dimensions of Islamic science in his work *Science and Civilization in Islam*, and Ismail al-Faruqi (1982), who formally introduced the concept in *The Islamization of Knowledge* (Nurul Athirah Nordin & Nur Farhana Abdul Rahman, 2023). In fact, Ungku Omar had already proposed the establishment of an Islamic university in 1967—well before Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas's suggestion in 1973, which culminated in the First World Conference on Islamic Education in Makkah in 1977.

CONCLUSIONS

Ungku Omar was an outstanding Malay figure and a determined national advocate who remained steadfast in his efforts to champion the future of the Malay community. His contributions went beyond lifting the Malays out of educational underdevelopment; he also left behind an intellectual legacy through a body of work that remains highly valuable for future generations. His writings served the field of medicine and functioned as general reading material, particularly in raising awareness about public health and hygiene.

His instrumental role in the establishment of University Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) and an Islamic-based university proves that he was not merely a scientist but also a renowned educationist. These institutions have produced a significant number of Malay intellectuals, technocrats, and bureaucrats, thereby demonstrating his success in elevating the Malay language as a medium of knowledge transmission. His contributions to the idea of Islamization of knowledge through the integration of religion and science have greatly enriched the field of education. However, his name has not been widely recognized as a contributor to the Islamization of knowledge. Therefore, Ungku Omar's intellectualism in the domains of medicine, education, health sciences, and the Islamization of knowledge deserves greater attention and appreciation by today's scholars.

The integration of religion and science is essential in addressing the issues of secularism and dualism that underpin the current educational system. In the Malaysian context, education aims to holistically develop an individual's capacity from intellectually, physically, emotionally, and ideologically. From the Islamic perspective, the ultimate goal of education aligns with the objectives of Islamization of knowledge to nurture a balanced and holistic society. However, contemporary society is facing an intellectual crisis in the face of an unbounded and rapidly evolving global landscape. One of the major challenges to the Islamization of knowledge in education system is spread through Western civilization and ideologies (Nurul Athirah Nordin & Nur Farhana Abdul Rahman, 2023).

Therefore, Ungku Omar's intellectualism in advancing the Malay nation deserves renewed recognition and scholarly attention. While his writings on the Islamization of knowledge may not have received widespread acclaim, the substance and vision he articulated remain consistent with Islamic ideals. His efforts to restructure the Islamic College curriculum by incorporating subjects such as science, mathematics, and engineering have inspired later figures in the Islamization of knowledge movement. For instance, scholars like Mohd Yusof and Khalijah Mohd Salleh introduced a core course titled *Tauhidic Science* in universities in 2010, echoing the pioneering ideas earlier advanced by Ungku Omar

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