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## COLUMNIST

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### History and nation-building



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THE Malaysian Historical Society (MHS), officially founded in 1953, is the scion of the world renowned Straits/Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, in existence over 120 years ago.

The organisation has contributed to frame understanding of Malaysian history, by linking our past to our present. MHS has generated a significant body of all aspects of Malaysian history knowledge, including, for instance, what education was like during the Japanese occupation.

The leaders of MHS were Datuk Mahmud Mat, Raja Sir Uda Raja Muhamad, Datuk Abdul Razak Hussein, Datuk Musa Hitam, Abdul Ghafar Baba, Datuk Hussein Onn and Sheikh Hamdan Tahir.

Tan Sri Omar Hashim, at the helm of the society since 1989, again mobilised historians to contribute their research works in yet another milestone conference -- Malaysian History Summit held on Tuesday and Wednesday

Malaysian historians specialise in Southeast Asian, Islamic, African, Thai, Chinese, and Russian history. There are those like Zawawi Ibrahim, Hood Salleh, Zainal Kling, Muhammad Hear Awang, Hamidin Abdul Hamid and Omar Farouk Bajunid, whose specialisations cross between history, political sciences, economics, and anthropology.

However, those historians specialising in Malaysian history proper, the history of various states, personalities or historical events are those widely engaged in advocacy regarding nationalism and patriotism. From time to time, several are involved in revisionist history, in part or in whole, regarding events, or historical personalities.

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Of Malaysian historians, in the post-independence era, Zainal Abidin Wahid left the civil service to be an academician at the University of Malaya.

There he was the pioneer in promoting Malay historiography.

He continued the interest as the Professor in the History Department in the National University of Malaya and influenced generations of historians. Muhamad Yusof Hashim, Ramlah Adam and others continued the works on Malay historiography. Muhammad Yusof Ibrahim wrote on Malay Historiography (Pensejarahan Melayu) 1800-1960.

The most prolific of Malaysian historians who influenced thousands of students who became leaders in the civil service, the private sector or the teaching profession, is Professor Emeritus Khoo Kay Kim.

He is the one Malaysian historian recognised and respected nationally and internationally, capable of analysing and interpreting all kinds of significant and seemingly trivial historical matters, evoking rare insights. Among his seminal works is Malay Society.

Little known is the contributions of the cohort of Malaysians who received their higher education in the University of Singapore in the 1950s and 1960s.

Among them were Ahmad Sarji, Raden Soenarno, Azizah Abbas, Asiah Abu Samah and Aziz Ismail. Their works on various aspects of the history of Malaya, were the treasured references used by the first generations of history students at the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur in the 1960s.

Raden Soenarno wrote on Malay Nationalism (1896-1941) and 1900-1945, Aziz Ismail on Problems and Policies in Education in the Federation, 1945-1952 and Asiah Abu Samah on Emancipation of Malay Women, 1945-1957.

Of the illustrious textbook writers who have influenced thousands, nay millions, of students were Joginder Singh Jessy, Muzaffar Tate, N.J. Ryan, and M. Thambirajah. These cumulative historical inquiry assets, of historical focus, research on facts and interpretations, are materials for the history curriculum which are expected to develop a collective historical memory among Malaysians.

Students have the right to experience history as a scientific inquiry, a discipline in the social sciences, and, not history as a vehicle for propaganda or indoctrination. The critical debate remains whether the proper place for advocacy of political elements of national history is in the school subject of history or in citizenship education.

Malaysians have not written books on the history of the world or such interesting historical works like Brian Bryson's "A Short History of Nearly Everything" and "At Home: A Short History of Private Life"; T. Homer's "The Book of Origins" -- "The First of Everything from Art to Zoos" and T. Zeldin's "An Intimate History of Humanity".

The next generation of Malaysian historians can move on to be contributors at the global level beyond the focus on political histories.

Malaysians have come to write autobiographies and allow for the writing of their biographies after the initial criticism that those who do so are rick as vanity or vain glory.

There is now the evolving genre of memoirs like those of Rahim Majid, Abdul Majid Othman, Sharifah Habsah Syed Hassan Shahabuddin, Raden Soernano, Joe Chelliah, Ghazali Hanafiah, Lim Goh Tong, and

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Omar Hashim. Malaysians now have the confidence to explore history and personal lives in reflection.

Writer is a deputy vice-chancellor, INTI Laureate International University



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