

Dictionary of Malaysian Biography Project*

Abstrack: *Projek Kamus Biografi Malaysia telah diwujudkan di Universiti Malaya dalam tahun 1984. Pengwujudan projek ini merupakan satu jejak yang bersejarah dalam bidang penulisan biografi nasional di negara kita. Projek ini akan mengkaji dengan teliti konsep biografi kebangsaan; perunding-perunding dan penyelidik-penyelidik dan para anggota lain akan terdiri daripada pakar-pakar dalam semua bidang kehidupan. Rencana yang berikut akan menerangkan rasional bagi mengwujudkan terbitan biografi Malaysia dan langkah-langkah yang harus diikuti bagi mencapai tujuannya.*

The idea of having a project aimed at compiling a Dictionary of Malaysian Biography was first proposed in October, 1982, at a meeting of the History Department, University of Malaya. It was felt that such a publication should be invaluable for research and teaching purposes. At a special meeting held on 3rd November 1982 it was agreed that the proposed project could come under the University's Institute of Advanced Studies so as to draw upon it the wider facilities and resources existing there. The meeting also proposed Prof. Abu Bakar Hamid, Prof. Madya Krishen Jit and Prof. Madya Lee Kam Hing to be interim coordinators of the project.

The coordinators submitted the Dictionary Project proposal to the Institute of Advanced Studies at the end of November 1982 and this was eventually accepted by the Institute's Jawatankuasa Penasihat Akademik on 4th April 1983. Funding from the University of Malaya's Vote F was approved only at the end of May 1984. A sum of \$25,000 was granted for the first financial year. Of this \$24,000 was allocated for research travel and \$1,000 for typing and photocopying facilities.

Part of the allocation was used during 1984 for the employment of two temporary research assistants for a period of three months between April and

June. In August the Dictionary Project appointed Cik J. B. Patsy as research assistant. The Project has an office in the Institute of Advanced Studies. This is being used by the research assistant but it is becoming evident that a new room or office is required to store the growing volume of data and files which are being compiled as well as to function as a secretariat.

Nature of Project

As this will be the first comprehensive biographical dictionary in Malaysia, its value is self-evident. Some biographical reference works are currently available viz., *Who's Who in Malaysia*, *Wajah. Biografi Seratus Penulis*, but they have limitations or they are specialized biographies and therefore narrow in scope (e.g. *Wajah*). We envisage a comprehensive and rigorously researched dictionary encompassing a wide range of expertise; in effect, the dictionary will be a summing-up of Malaysian history as viewed through the lives of its significant performers. Once completed, these qualities of the dictionary as well as its authoritative character will make it eminently accessible to scholars and non-scholars alike for convenient reference. The absence of such a reference work presently renders research and teaching in

* This article is based on a report prepared by the three coordinators of the Project. The coordinators are Prof. Abu Bakar Hamid, Prof. Madya Krishen Jit and Prof. Madya Lee Kam Hing.

Malaysian studies cumbersome and time-consuming.

The project will refer to biographical dictionaries of other countries such as the *Dictionary of American Biography*, *The Dictionary of National Biography* (Britain), and the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* as examples of its format in publication. These are outstanding works and reflect meticulously researched efforts. They are projects sponsored by learned societies and institutions of their respective countries.

The nature of the project, most particularly the establishment of a consortium of consultants and experts, and also of supplementary volumes of a specialized nature, will define and indeed extend the boundaries of biographical studies in Malaysia. Biographical work is grossly neglected in Malaysian scholarship, and this project, apart from fulfilling the need for such an area of enquiry, should also act as a catalyst for further research and development.

The project will have an interdisciplinary framework, drawing upon the advice and expertise of historians, economists, anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, scientists as well as historians and critics of literature and the arts. The subject matter of the dictionary covers all areas of human activities and endeavour, and hence the project requires an interdisciplinary approach. Interdisciplinary fellowship is too infrequently practised in Malaysian studies and this project should provide a salutary experience and stride toward its fulfilment in one important area of scholarship.

By the nature of its content and the process of its preparation this Project will be national in scope. Essentially it is concerned with the writing of one aspect of national history by scholars of the nation. Therefore the project should be valuable in crystallizing as well as translating through biographical forms what might be termed as a national experience in its multidimensional manifestations.

The Project is expected to yield various subsidiary benefits that are of an academic nature. Firstly, the research and collection of materials would make available in the University of Malaya a comprehensive deposit of biographical data which will be centralized and carefully catalogued for general use. Secondly, the series of workshops, seminars and discussions expected to be held will encourage new thinking on biographical studies especially problems and peculiarities as they relate to the Malaysian context.

The proceedings and results of such discussions would be published as occasional papers or monographs by the Project and they should thereby contribute towards a corpus of new literature on the subject. Thirdly, the area of biographical studies could be developed into teaching courses and the

expertise and materials acquired by the project made available to the teachers wishing to launch such courses. Undergraduates working on particular personalities will also be given access to the data and guidance by the Project. Fourthly, the Project could promote and encourage leading personalities in this country to prepare their memoirs. The Project would make available its facilities as well as providing an environment for these efforts.

Organizational Structure

A three-tiered organizational structure is envisaged with each tier closely linked and in constant and dynamic interaction with the other.

(a) **Board of Consultants.** This will consist of recognized experts in their respective fields and also of those with interest and experience sufficiently wide and general so as to generate ideas on the subject of biographical studies and more specifically, a biographical dictionary. This Board will reflect the Project's interdisciplinary character and also its national scope. Foreign expertise will only be limited by its usefulness to the Project and the efficiency of its operation. The Board of Consultants will be headed by a Chairman who will co-ordinate its contributions mostly through correspondence and who will also act as the liaison with the Editorial Board. Most of the consultation will be conducted by correspondence either singly or as a consortium and whenever the need arises, the group might be called together to consultative meetings and workshops.

The Consultation Board should consist of no more than 12 but not less than 10 leading and active historians, economists, anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, scientists, historians and critics of literature and the arts, librarians and archivists. Prominent public figures who could also advise and assist the Project should also be considered for possible inclusion.

(b) **The Editorial Board.** We envisage an Editorial Board, which will be the central working body, of 6 people, 3 of whom should be historians and 3 others from other disciplines, thereby instilling an interdisciplinary fellowship in the Board. From the viewpoint of logistics and efficiency, it would be preferred if all 6 are staff of the University of Malaya.

The Editorial Board will be the central working body concerned with the executive operations of the Project and will act as the liaison between the other organizational boards and groups created by the Project. The Board, for example, will initiate consultation, organize project teams, seminars and work-

shops, and, with the advice of the Board of Consultants, make selection of figures to be included in the Dictionary. It will also invite contributions and will either edit the contributions on its own or elicit editorial assistance from members of the Board of Consultants. The Editorial Board will also publish proceedings of seminars and workshops and whenever possible ensure the preparation and circulation of copies of completed studies. In all areas relating to scholarship, this Board will constantly seek the advice of the Board of Consultants.

(c) Project Teams

Initiated by Editorial Board or by interested individuals and groups, project teams concerned with specialized areas of biographies, will eventually feed the larger project with lists of names to be included in the Dictionary and also with contribution. Project Teams made up of individuals or of groups are envisaged for subsidiary projects such as biographies of Malay Sultans, proto-nationalist and nationalist leaders, prominent Malays, Chinese and Indians, prominent women, parliamentarians, literary figures, artists and dramatists, etc. Project Teams could be selected by the Editorial Board either by appointment of interested individuals or through advertisement to interested scholarly institutions.

The Operation of Project

We envisage 4 necessary phases to conclude the preparation and publication of the Dictionary. The breakdown of the process of work is as follows:

(a) **Phase One.** The installation of the infrastructure of the Project, including the Board of Consultants, the Editorial Board, and the Project Teams. The Editorial Board, as the central working unit, will require office space and equipment, and a staff consisting of an administrative assistant, a librarian and an office secretary.

Once the infrastructure is established, the Editorial Board, in consultation with the Board of Consultants, will initiate seminars and workshops, covering the following areas: the format and shape of the biographical dictionary, the nature of biographical studies, the basis for selection of personalities to be included in the Dictionary, and the value of inter-disciplinary research in preparation for a biographical dictionary. For the first of the seminars on the nature of the dictionary, a foreign expert, with direct experience in compiling such a dictionary in his/her country, should be invited. He/she can act as a consultant for a short period, imparting his/her experience in informal and formal groups.

Paralleling this activity, the Project will encourage

subsidiary projects, channelled through Project Teams which will always maintain a working relationship with the Project, who might provide these smaller projects, financial and technical assistance. The Project, in turn, will benefit by the experience of the subsidiary projects, which would also feed the larger dictionary by providing it with contributions.

(b) **Phase Two.** During this phase, after the Project has been initiated, the process of selecting personalities to be included in the Dictionary should begin. The names will be provided by the Editorial Board and Project Teams, channelled to the Editorial Board which will then begin the data bank. During the selection process, constant advice will be sought from the Consultative Board including after a final list is accomplished. The final list should be the result of a consensus between the Board of Consultants and the Editorial Board.

Once the lists are prepared, contributors should be selected by the Editorial Board who will endeavour to seek the advice of the Board of Consultants.

(c) **Phase Three.** By this stage the preparation of the biographies by the contributors would have begun. Each contribution will initially be edited by a member of the Editorial Board before it is sent to a consultant with the relevant expertise. Early drafts will be published as occasional papers and made available to those involved and interested in the Project so as to obtain comments. During this phase too, the Project will publish any of the subsidiary projects which have reached completion.

(d) **Phase Four.** This is the editorial work and publication of the Dictionary. Edited biographies will continue to be published as occasional papers and the Project will also continue to bring out incoming manuscripts resulting from the subsidiary projects.

Activities to Date

The activities in 1984 were devoted largely to preparing the groundwork of the project. Individuals and institutions known to have interest or association with Malaysian studies were informed about the Dictionary proposal. A description of the Dictionary Project was published in the Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, Malaysian Branch, Indonesia Circle, and the newsletter of the British Institute in Southeast Asia. The editors of the three journals share the view that scholars interested in Malaysia ought to be informed of the project. The response has, in every instance, been extremely positive and encouraging. Scholars from the Universiti Sains Malaysia, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Universiti Malaya,

the National University of Singapore and the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore generally indicated willingness to participate. The director of the National Archives is keen to cooperate closely with the research, and the New Straits Times/Berita Harian Group, on learning of the Dictionary project, has written in expressing support and offering to assist. Various overseas scholars have also indicated interest and preparedness to contribute to the Dictionary. The New Zealand Dictionary of Biography which is also at the beginning stage of the project has suggested institutional links. The director of the British Institute in Southeast Asia informed the Dictionary project that he could help arrange to bring British scholars to Malaysia for short visits if there is a request. A list of scholars and institutions who would be involved in the project is being prepared.

On 26 January 1985, a seminar was held to which about 30 scholars from the University of Malaya and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia attended. After discussions, the seminar selected twenty historical personalities to be studied in a conference planned for February 1986. Twenty scholars were identified to prepare the papers. In addition, three topics aimed at examining some of the problems in biographical writing in Malaysia were proposed.

The Project arranged several seminars to promote greater awareness and thinking on Malaysian biography writing. In September 1983 Tan Sri Mubin Sheppard discussed "The Retrieval of Data in Malaysian Biography"; Prof. Y. Akashi from Nanzan University in Japan, who will be a contributor to the Dictionary presented in April 1984 a paper entitled "Prominent Japanese in Malaya, 1942-45", and Dr. Sharon Carsten from Cornell University gave a seminar on "Yap Ah Loy: The Making of a Hero" in June 1984.

In the meanwhile the Project, with the assistance of Cik Nik Zaiton Nik Salleh and Cik Johara Abdul Wahad—two temporary research assistants—and Cik J. B. Patsy, have been compiling a master list of names from which selection will be made to the Dictionary. To date a total of 4,465 names have

been recorded. Many more will be added. Each name is given a card upon which brief information and source references are provided. Biographical data are also being collected and 143 files have so far been opened. The compilation of names and collection of data is a tedious but necessary exercise. It forms, needless to say, an essential basis of the Project. Plans are being made to buy a computer for convenient storage and retrieval of the data.

For the coming seminar in February 1986 the following papers will be discussed:

1. Biographical writing in Malaysia: An Overview.
2. Literary biography in Malaysia.
3. The Non-inclusion of Living Personalities in the Dictionary of Malaysian Biography.
4. Notoriety as a criterion for selection in the Dictionary of Malaysian Biography.
5. Research Methodology in Writing Biographies of Legendary Figures.
6. The Significance of Colonial Administration Figures in Malaysian Biography.

There will also be papers on the following personalities:

1. Dato Onn Jaafar
2. Abd. Rahim Kajai
3. Dr. Burhanuddin Al-Helmy
4. Tun V.T. Sambanthan
5. Munshi Abdullah
6. Sheikh Tahir Jalaluddin
7. Loke Yew
8. Sultan Abdullah of Perak
9. Tun Fuad Stephen
10. Pak Mat
11. P. Ramlee
12. Thambosemy Pillai
13. Khadijah Sidek
14. Sir Raja Chulan
15. Maharaja Abu Bakar of Johor
16. Tun Abdul Razak Hussein
17. Zaba
18. Temenggung Jugah
19. Tan Sri Nik Ahmad Kamil
20. Tan Cheng Lock