

A LEGEND FOR ALL REASONS: A Tribute to Tan Sri Dr Abdul Majid bin Ismail

Abdul Hamid Abdul Kadir, MBBS (Singapore), FRCS (Edin), MchOrth (Liverpool) FAMM
Department of Orthopaedics, MAHSA University, Kuala Lumpur

In the chronicle of life, the passing away of a person is oft simply noted as demise. At other times, such an event is recorded as the end of an era. The passing away of Tan Sri Abdul Majid marks a watershed in the history of our country, the period of transition between the Colonial years and the birth of the Malayan nation.

Abdul Majid's life and times spanning 92 years reminds us of another person in another era in another country who rose from the log cabin to the White House, but just more remarkable that ours was in a far-flung outpost of the British Empire.

The beginning

Abdul Majid was born, the eldest of 12 children, in his grandfather's house in Kampong Baru in Kuala Lumpur, on 15 November 1921, to Ismail, his "Baba", as he liked to refer to his father, who was a poor, illiterate machinist in the Central Railway Workshops in Sentul. His mother was "Nya" to him.

His years of growing up and schooling were sprinkled with escapades of mischief and pranks, recorded in his own words and inimitable style in his memoir. He was Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn and Charles Dickens' Artful Dodger rolled into one but totally harmless and quite innocent.

At various times through those years he had been a farmer, a golf caddy (carrying the bag for the white *tuan* and his *mem* – there were no golf tees those days and the caddy had to shape a small mound of earth with his hand on which the golfer placed the ball for tee-off), an entrepreneur during the Japanese occupation (selling tapioca grown by him, kerosene oil and dried fish), a waiter at elegant government functions in Carcosa, a glamorous, elegant colonial mansion, celebrating British Empire Day or in honour of visiting royalties and dignitaries.

He loved movies, fishing and climbing coconut trees, and in between when he was a boy he had typhoid fever and was treated with loads of quinine, and later in 1939 had survived an attack of scrub typhus. There was no known medication for scrub typhus at that time, and luckily for him he was treated as a guinea pig with a new medicine called



15.11.1921 - 24.3.2013

Chloromycetin on trial by an US Army Medical research Unit at the Institute for Medical Research (IMR) for treatment of scrub typhus and typhoid fever.

Medical Student Years and the Japanese Occupation

He was a top Malay student in Victoria Institution and when he obtained his Senior Cambridge Certificate in 1939, he was called up by Raja Tun Uda, at that time the Secretary to the British Resident and later the Governor of Penang, and ordered "Majid, you shall go to Singapore and learn to be a doctor."

He entered King Edward VII College of Medicine in 1940, and during his freshman years, got the epithet "Coco", which would be stuck with him forever. A senior gentleman Omar bin Din, (later Radiologist in General Hospital KL), decided to stage a skit from the movie "The Jungle Princess", which was then showing at the Cathay Cinema in Bras Basah Road, Singapore, with the Hollywood screen goddess, Dorothy Lamour as Ulah, a sort of female Tarzan. This was part of the ragging which used to go on for a month. A fellow freshman was made to dress up like Dorothy Lamour, while Abdul Majid got the role of Dorothy's pet chimpanzee, Coco. In years to come, he would be referred to as "Coco" by his friends. Incidentally, it is of some interest that the story of The Jungle Princess was set in Malaya.

Abdul Majid's medical studies were interrupted by the invasion of the Japanese forces, who had landed in Kelantan, on the east coast of the Malay peninsula, on 8th December 1941 and had cycled into Singapore, the day after the bombing of the US Pacific Fleet off the Hawaiian coast. By 9th January 1942, some 23,000 more Japanese troops had entered the island and the invasion was complete by late February 1942 with surrender of the British forces.

He describes in graphic detail in his biography how the Alexandria Military Hospital and Tan Tock Seng Hospital were bombed on 14 February 1942 and how a medical student had succumbed to injury. While he was being buried, the Japanese Air Force, probably assuming that the coffin was loaded with dangerous ammunition, dropped bombs killing some ten medical and dental students who had gathered for the funeral. Abdul Majid had escaped by a twist of fate when just before that moment he was called to the operation theatre to assist Professor Munro operating on many wounded patients. Majid later helped in the burial of his dead friends, which to him was a most heart-wrenching experience. The burial ceremony was performed by a Catholic priest, a Buddhist monk and a Muslim imam.

The medical school was taken over by the Japanese Army Medical Corps for a while and run in an old ward in Tan Tock Seng Hospital. It was called Ikka Daigakku, medical college in Japanese. However, in 1943, the School was moved lock, stock and barrel to Malacca General Hospital, where Coco received some semblance of medical education. In August 1945, Little Boy in Hiroshima and Fat Man in Nagasaki brought an end to the Pacific War. The Japanese Commander-in-Chief Lt. Gen Teizo Ishiguro surrendered to the British commander in Malaya Lt. Gen. OL Roberts, the ceremony having been held in the Victoria Institution hall in Kuala Lumpur, which had been used by the Japanese as an administrative headquarters during their occupation.

The King Edward VII College of Medicine in Singapore was re-opened in 1946 and Abdul Majid re-entered the course, graduating MBBS, and receiving the scroll from the Commissioner-General of South East Asia, the Rt. Hon. Malcolm MacDonald, who was also first Chancellor of the newly named University of Malaya, on 8th July 1950. Dr Chee Pui Hung his close friend in Singapore graduated at the same time, along with another good friend, Dr Syed Mohamed Alwi Alhady.

The Young Doctor and Postgraduate Studies

Abdul Majid had his houseman training in General Hospital KL, while his seniors Dr Tan Chee Khoo and Dr Parampalam were medical officers at that time. The training was under Mr JAP Cameron, who was a general surgeon but had also obtained the Masters degree in Orthopaedic Surgery from Liverpool. In the operating list would be burr hole, tonsillectomy, thoracotomy, abdominal surgery, caesareans, hysterectomies, hernias, and trauma and orthopaedics, all



Dr Abdul Majid receiving the MBBS scroll from Sir Malcolm MacDonald in 1950.

done by the general surgeon. Cameron set up the first orthopaedic unit in the country in General Hospital Kuala Lumpur in 1949 and later left for Singapore as the Professor of Orthopaedics. He was succeeded by Mr O'Malley.

In 1951, the young doctor Abdul Majid married Khairany, originally from Padang in West Sumatra, whose parents had settled in Singapore. He had met her during his medical studies and had obviously been smitten by her simple charm. In 1953, Coco was awarded the Queen's Scholarship to study in England, and he utilised it for the Fellowship in Surgery at the Royal College of Surgeons, Edinburgh. On completing his Fellowship in 1955, he returned with the family by a Dutch ship, the *Willem Ruys*, sailing round the Cape of Good Hope (as there was a Suez Canal crisis at that time) into Tanjong Pagar Harbour in Singapore. He was to have straightaway continued with orthopaedic training in the University of Liverpool, but the message only reached him after he and his family had already boarded the ship. So, on his return to Malaya he was posted as the State Surgeon of Negeri Sembilan, taking over from Dr. Thiruchelvam.

The Orthopaedic Chief

In 1957, in the year that Malaya became an independent nation, he went back to England to pursue the Master's degree in Orthopaedics at the University of Liverpool. He received practical training at the Robert Jones & Agnes Hunt Orthopaedic Hospital in Oswestry. He obtained the Master's degree (MChOrth) by the end of the year, the first Malayan to have done so, and took the *SS Canton* from Southampton to Singapore, with his wife and son, Aljafri, and his Ford Zodiac in the cabin hold.

In 1958, Abdul Majid was appointed the first Malayan Chief Orthopaedic Surgeon at the Kuala Lumpur General Hospital, taking over from Mr O'Malley. Amongst his many tasks was to establish an orthopaedic unit in every state general hospital in the country. He was also instrumental in establishing schools for physiotherapy, and orthopaedic nursing, and also the National Artificial Limb and Prosthetic Centre, a National Spinal Centre and an Institute of Orthopaedics in the grounds of the hospital.



With members of Malaysian Orthopaedic Association and their wives in 1970s.

He was also Chairman of the Senior Asian Government Officers Association (SAGOA), and also of Selangor Government Servants Cooperative Thrift and Loan Society. In 1967, the Malaysian Orthopaedic Association was formed, with Abdul Majid as the founding President. Among the founder members were Drs Pretam Singh, Mahmood Merican, Mohd Iqbal, Subr Sengupta, Balasubramaniam, M Sivanantham and Kannan Kutty. He held the post till 1982, when Dr Khaw Joo Hua took over as President.

Positions of Leadership

In 1969, he was appointed the Deputy Director of Health (Planning & Research), a position that was created for him, and two years later he succeeded Dr Mohamed Din bin Ahmad as the Director General of Health, the second Malayan and the first clinician to be so appointed, a position which he held until his retirement in 1976, at the age of 55 after having served in government service for a total of twenty-six years. He was the first Eisenhower Fellow from Malaya in 1963 spending six months visiting various locations in the USA.



As Director-General of Health with the Minister of Health, Dato Lee Siok Yew in Sarawak.

The first surgical organisation formed in the country was the Association of Fellows of the RCS Edinburgh, on the initiative of Dr M Balasegaram and Dr Siva Kandiah in the

1970's, with Abdul Majid as President. Later this was dissolved and incorporated into the College of Surgeons of Malaysia and Abdul Majid was its founding President. The eponymous AM Ismail oration was inaugurated by Dr Rodney Smith, (later knighted Baron Smith of Marlow), and the second oration was by Professor GB Ong of Hong Kong in 1974, entitled "And One Man in his Name".

ASEAN Orthopaedic Association

In 1979, Abdul Majid was invited to the annual congress of the Indonesian Orthopaedic Association in Bandung, and in the course of casual discussion, the idea of forming an ASEAN Orthopaedic Association arose.

In 1981, the first ASEAN Orthopaedic Association organisational meeting was held in Manila, through the efforts of Dr Jose M Pujalte, who was elected the Foundation President, with founding members from the Philippines (Drs Jose Silao Jr, Vicente Pido, Montalban, Ellwellyn Pasion, Rimando Saguin), from Indonesia (Professor Soelarto Reksoprodjo, Prof Cheha Hilmy), from Malaysia (Dr Abdul Majid Ismail and Professor P Balasubramaniam), from Singapore (Professor Robert Pho, Ong Leong Boon), and from Thailand (Drs Thamrongrat Keokarn and Professor Natee Rukspolmuang). Professor Reksoprodjo was elected Senior Vice-President, and Dr Keokarn, Professor Pho, and Dr Abdul Majid were elected Founding Vice-Presidents. Dr Ong Leong Boon was named Founding Secretary-General and he conducted the affairs of AOA with consummate fervour until a few years ago; the post is now with Dr. Ellwellyn Pasion. Over the years the AOA has grown from strength to more strength, with the addition of Myanmar, Vietnam, Brunei and Cambodia, with regular annual congresses hosted by the member countries, and with the fostering of mutual cooperation and camaraderie among the orthopaedic fraternity.



The Founding Members of the ASEAN Orthopaedic Association 1981.

A Player of Many Parts

Abdul Majid was involved in many national projects including the establishment of Universiti Kebangsaan

Malaysia, the hospital in Kubang Krian, Kelantan, which USM took over as its teaching hospital, the private Pantai Hospital, the Tun Hussein Onn Eye Hospital, and the acquirement on lease of the land on Jalan Tun Razak (Circular Road) where the building housing the Academies of Medicine now proudly stands and facilitated acquirement of the land for the MMA House on Jalan Pahang. He had served as member and chairman of the Council of University of Malaya for 28 years. He had declined the positions of Vice-Chancellor of UKM and USM, and the Mayor of Kuala Lumpur at various times.

He was President of the Heart Foundation, Malaysian Council for Rehabilitation for many years, and also President of the Royal Lake Club.

When he was the Orthopaedic consultant in KL General Hospital, he started the Coco's Mess in Bukit Bintang, where his friends could put their feet up and let their hair down. This raised a lot of eyebrows and was the subject of a complaint brought up by an Opposition member in Parliament who wanted \$10 cut off from the pay of the Minister of Health for not knowing that his senior consultant was running this dubious establishment!

The "Knave" among the Royals and the Elite

His love for the game of golf had been nurtured from the days when he was a caddy in Sentul Golf Club, and this continued unabated over the years, right up to his old age, as a lifelong passion.

Golf got him into close association with the Royalty, particularly DYMM the Sultan of Selangor, and with Prime Ministers, Ministers, politicians and the rich and famous. He moved and mingled with them at par but probably never out of bounds, and referred to himself in his memoir as the 'knave' playing in a foursome with three reigning Sultans.

He was entrusted with building the Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Golf Club in Shah Alam, for which he engaged the services of Peter Thompson, the famous Australian golfer and five-time British Open champion.

He also built the Selesa Hill Homes (a health resort) and a challenging 18-hole Golf Course in Bukit Tinggi not far from Kuala Lumpur.

The Adventure Continued

His life continued with exciting adventures at various times. He took up horse riding, hunting wild boar, shooting green pigeons, and on one occasion as a medical student, riding a circus elephant from Jalan Besar on the streets of Singapore on the way to a rugby match at the campus padang to intimidate the opposing players.



Three Sultans and a "knave" on the golf course.

He loved classical music and song, movies, poetry and novels, and the occasional mah-jong with his Chinese friends and a spin on the floor of the Bukit Bintang cabaret in Kuala Lumpur in his younger days, and the Great World cabaret while he was medical student in Singapore.

Much later, after his retirement, he procured a pub called the Dungeon which he renamed Serendit Pub in a basement at the corner of Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman and Dang Wangi, also a lorry transport outfit, a firm called Syarikat Endah Sari dealing with medical supplies and equipment.

He was also responsible for the establishment and international links of a tertiary education institution called INTI College. He had presented a treatise on "A Malay people's perspective of Kuala Lumpur" to the Malaysian Historical Society in 2004.

It was natural that as a kampong boy he wanted to re-enact the enchantment of rural life. He created an idyllic retreat (dusun) called Alang Sedayu at 12th mile Gombak (where he reared fish, chicken, cows, turkeys, and grew durian, mangosteen and rambutan fruit trees), entertaining local friends and visitors from overseas, including Sir John Bruce and examiners of Part I Fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons Edinburgh, in 1971-2.

A Legend in his Time

He had received numerous state and federal titles and honours from overseas Colleges. Coco was a man for all seasons, always finding time to be with his old buddies from yester years. The second day Hari Raya Puasa open house at his house in Taman Duta was an occasion to regale on simple kampong fare and reminisce with celebrities, and many simple folk from all walks of life. He had a set of jokes which he brought out in inimitable style when he was invited to liven up any gatherings.



General Hospital KL where Dr Abdul Majid started his houseman training in 1950.



With the first Prime Minister, Tengku Abdul Rahman.



Reception for Members of the Royal Australian College of Surgeons, with Tun Hussein Onn, third Prime Minister.

His memoir recorded verbatim by his younger daughter Ellina is a masterly biography of his 92 years of life. It is replete with names of people who were associated with him, and reads like a WHO'S-WHO in Malaysia and abroad. It is full of personal anecdotes and historical facts. His photographic memory for details of events, dates and names is amazing. The book, *An Old Man Remembers*, is a historical and nostalgic must-read.



Abdul Majid with his wife Khairany binti Mahyudin.



With Dr Mahathir Mohamed, the 4th Prime Minister.



Tan Sri and his memoir 'An Old Man Remembers' 2006.

Was there anything that he had not done or achieved? One truly cannot think of any. Tan Sri Dr Abdul Majid had lived

his life with uninhibited enthusiasm, unflagging spirit and unbridled passion. He was the quintessential Kampong Boy.

Excerpts from some of his quotable quotes are:

Perhaps most important of all, is that I have never forgotten where I came from.

I am not ashamed of my humble beginnings...

Experience is a tough teacher because she gives you the test first, and then only, do you learn the lesson afterwards.

His grandchildren and their children loved him and he always had time for them. He dedicates his memoir to them...."Dato wants to tell you what he's been up to, all these years; it's a long story...."

And as Ellina, his younger daughter fittingly notes:

"This is the story of a poor Malay boy living under British rule in one of the far-flung outposts of the British Empire. A boy who made good, and in his own small way, was one of the multitudes of young Malaysians, who helped to build a new nation, which we call MALAYSIA, into what it is today."

Tan Sri Abdul Majid Ismail passed away on 24 March 2013. He is survived by his loving wife Puan Sri Khairany, son Dr Alfajri, daughters Elisha and Ellina, grandchildren and great grandchildren. To them we convey our deepest condolence. May Tan Sri Dato Seri Dr Haji 'Coco' Abdul Majid bin Ismail rest in peace.

REFERENCES

1. An Old Man Remembers: The Memoir as told by the Old Man himself. "The Written Word" (publisher). Proprint Enterprise, 2006.
2. Personal Communications.