Ungku Omar a patriot par excellence, says Raja Nazrin

IPOH: Raja Dr Nazrin Shah, an eminent member of the Perak royalty, yesterday paid tribute to Professor Datuk Dr Ungku Omar Ahmad, after whom the country’s first polytechnic — Politeknik Ungku Omar (PUO) — has been named.

Calling the Johor Baru-born a nationalist and a patriot par excellence, the Raja Muda of Perak said Ungku Omar had set an unparalleled example of selfless dedication towards improving the condition of the Malay community.

Raja Nazrin said his persistence and commitment in promoting Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction at institutions of higher learning reflected Ungku Omar’s vision for children in rural areas to obtain equal opportunities in and access to higher education.

“He strongly believed that Malay children living in the countryside would have a better shot and a more equal chance at getting higher education if the language was made the language of knowledge and its usage increased in higher learning institutions.

“The establishment of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia’s medical faculty, which uses the language as the medium of instruction, has produced many high calibre graduates. The use of the national language as the language of knowledge in this medical faculty was an idea advocated strongly by Ungku Omar,” he said at the opening of PUO’s 41st convocation here.

Also present were Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Dr Zambry Abd Kadir, senior Ipoh High Court judge Datuk Zainal Adzam Abd Ghani and PUO director Kamaruddin Hamzah.

Born in 1931, Ungku Omar obtained his secondary education at Malay College Kuala Kangsar before graduating as a medical doctor from University of Malaya in Singapore in 1957.

In 1965, he completed his doctoral thesis in clinical chemistry and was accepted as a member of the Institute of Biology, London, in the same year. He was made an honorary member of the United States College of American Pathologists two years later. He also obtained advanced diplomas in Pathology from the Royal College of Physicians and the Royal College of Surgeons.

These successes eventually led to Ungku Omar’s appointment as the director of the Institute of Medical Research in Kuala Lumpur.

“He was the first Malay to head the research institute and during his lifetime, until his death in 1969, he had stressed the importance of nutrition among the Malays.

“He always stressed good health as he believed good health influenced the progress of an ethnic group,” Raja Nazrin said.

“Ungku Omar was concerned with the poverty among the Malays, especially those living in rural areas, who were deprived of nutritional food sources like vitamins and protein. He always thought of ways to uplift the Malays living in the countryside who were backward.”

Raja Nazrin, who was overcome by emotions, choked while speaking of Ungku Omar.

Although it has been 43 years since the death of the nationalist, Raja Nazrin said efforts must be made to revive Ungku Omar’s spirit in the current generation so that his struggles, vision and goals could be continued.

He said the contributions, struggles and role of Ungku Omar should be taught as part of POU’s induction programme for every student and staff member of the 43-year-old polytechnic.