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An erosion of our confidence

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THE Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, has lately set out to tackle the problem of "punk culture" among the youth of Malaysia today. This was, he said, a worrying problem simply because of its magnitude and the speed with which it had spread.

All over the country, we now see bands of Malaysians youth dressed in leather jackets and sporting spiked hair, like some "army of the Apocalypse" waiting for some great catastrophe to befall upon them.

While some liberal-minded Malaysians continue to reject such warnings as simple changes of recreational defensiveness, they have failed to note that such pervasive cultural changes are unprecedented and are in fact symptoms of the process of globalisation. The fact that it is Western punk culture, and not Japanese, Arab, African or other Asian cultures that is spreading to all walks of life in Malaysia and in other parts of the South and the developing world is an obvious indicator that what is being globalised is the norms and standards of the developed western world. These standards are themselves of the common dominator, and the culture that it has spawned is one of imitation, not innovation. Why is this, and why have we become so susceptible to such influences?

One could turn to the imbalances in the global economy for part of the explanation. The growing North-South gap has allowed the massive and powerful media and entertainment industries of the western world to obliterate all local opposition in other parts of the world. They have tried to buy up airspace, transmission rights, and buy their way into the local media markets of non-western societies. This is a threat of an economic and political nature, and needs to be addressed seriously. But this in itself does not explain why our youth is so inclined to take up two-dimensional characters like Michael Jackson and Madonna as heroes.

The other less palatable side of the answer is painfully obvious for those of us who care to admit it: the existence of punk culture in Malaysia is living proof of the fact that we no longer have confidence in our own culture, religion, history and traditions.

Without this confidence, we naturally assimilate and imitate that which we regard as superior. As long as this self-confidence is allowed to wane and degenerate, we will never be able to select the best elements from other cultures and regenerate the dynamics of our own. This predicament was explained so well by Muhammad Asad more than 50 years ago, when he considered the cultural decline of the Islamic and non-western world. He argued that the reason why Europe could rebuild itself after the Dark Ages was that the Europeans never lost confidence in themselves. Thus, even when the Europeans turned to the Arabs for knowledge, "they never imitated the outward appearance of Arabian culture, and never sacrificed their own intellectual and aesthetic independence". Thus Europeans learned from the Arabs, Asians and others, but never lost their sense of identity or self-confidence. Till this day, the Europeans retain their belief in their abilities and achievements.

As Asad concludes: "No civilisation can prosper, or even exist, after having lost its pride and connections with its own past."

We in Malaysia are at the same crossroad that Muhammad Asad walked upon. How do we respond?

Firstly, it must be noted that a defensive posture should not be taken when addressing these questions. Defensive moves like banning rock

concerts or calls for "cultural purity" simply miss the point that all cultures have a dynamics which allows for interaction, cross-cultural borrowing and accommodation. That is how all great civilisations emerge and develop.

Secondly, part of the solution lies in the recovery of our own past, our culture and even our national language. This cannot be achieved through a simplistic and nationalistic form of historiography which glosses over weaknesses and clings to empty dreams for a glorious but impossible future. Taking stock of our present predicament, assessing the achievements of our past in fields ranging from arts to literature, and trying to revive the best of these via a selective appropriation of what the western world can offer is a start in the right direction.

The elite of the country would thus be doing everyone a favour if they would start by setting an example. After all, bapak borek, anak rintek as the saying goes. As for today's youth, they should perhaps look at themselves in a more honest light. The time has come for them to admit that beneath their "macho" facade, they are nothing more than the pathetic symptoms of a culture sick with itself and is, at its heart, weakened by a deep inferiority complex. Roving around the city like bands of doomsday warriors, they fail to see that the Apocalypse has already arrived, and that they are its first victims.

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