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Double celebration a time to reflect

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AS we enjoy each other's hospitality during this year's Chinese New Year and Hari Raya Aidilfitri celebrations, it is opportune to recall and recollect the past.

It is not solely nostalgia. Retracing the long and sometimes arduous journey that we, as a people and a nation, have made could help to rekindle humanity in our souls and humility in our dealings with our fellow human beings.

It will help to invigorate the positive aspects of our multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious society and banish for good its negative elements.

We have for decades been participating in each other's celebrations in one way or another. At the very least, we have been enjoying public holidays on these occasions.

But in recent years, thanks to the growing convergence of interest among the ethnic groups in the political, economic and cultural spheres, participation in each other's celebrations has become more widespread and meaningful.

For instance, we are now more aware of each other's religious and cultural practices.

When I was a boy in a village in Kedah in the Fifties, I was told to keep away from the houses of our Chinese neighbours because they ate pork and kept dogs.

I was terrified when I studied the pictures of long-bearded and stern-looking Chinese gods gazing down from behind shrouds of smoke from burning joss-sticks on red altars.

A visit to my Hindu barber was not without its horrors.

Firstly, he could have turned out to be the headcutter who, according to my mother, chopped off children's heads to feed the spirits often residing at the sites of bridges under construction.

Secondly, the colourful pictures of his many gods - men, women and elephants - and the smell of burning incense told me that I was in an alien and intimidating environment.

Today, I am filled with nothing but gratitude when I think of a certain Malaysian Indian tycoon who has been sending juicy Californian dates just before the beginning of each Ramadan for the past few years.

This is a very significant gesture because dates are important to Muslims during the fasting month.

For many Muslims, visiting their Chinese friends during the New Year, the Hindus on Deepavali and the Christians during Christmas is no longer a rarity.

In recent years, these exchanges have been enhanced by the practice of rumah terbuka or open house.

But even these simple exchanges and gestures should not be left purely to chance.

There are already signs that while the pre- and post-independence generations are being drawn closer together, the post-New Economic Policy generation is polarised, very much along ethnic lines.

This is most apparent in the local universities and colleges.

And the physical mobility that perpetuates the balik kampung exodus could tear us apart save for the rumah terbuka (open house) held during and after the actual celebrations.

On the same note, I would like to take this opportunity to wish all readers Kongsì-Raya.

DURING this joyous double celebration, it is only natural that most of us would want to put our troubles and problems aside or, if possible, wish them away forever in order to truly savour the occasion.

Some problems may actually go away. Quarrelling couples may kiss and make up.

Troublesome in-laws may be pacified after a night-long yam seng and mahjong session when you deliberately lose to them and lovers may grow fonder of each other after a week's separation.

But many problems will not go away so easily. Some of them are not ours personally but they affect us nevertheless because they have grown to become the nation's problems.

I am not talking about the rising prices of food due to gluttony during the fasting month and of clothing in the run-up to the Chinese New Year and Hari Raya.

I am talking about the larger problems of dadah addiction, domestic violence, child abuse, teenage sex, bohsia and juvenile crime, lepak (loitering) and runaways.

Where have we gone wrong? Is it the parents and the household environment? The teachers and schools? The tok gurus and ulamas? The negative impact of the explosion of information and entertainment? Or could it be that while our pockets are replete with money, our hearts and souls are devoid of humanity and caring?

It has to begin with the parents. If parents are quarrelsome, most or all of their children may end up quarrelsome. If only one parent is quarrelsome, the consequences will not be too serious and chances of the children growing up to be quarrelsome are much less.

Children learn from their parents first before they learn from others. Unfortunately, better education and an improved standard of living seem not to be followed by better parenting. On the contrary, parenting skills are on the decline and fathers are worse parents than mothers.

Take a simple example. How can a father effectively tell his offspring not to smoke when he himself is a chain-smoker?

And how can he tell them to read books and study hard when all that he does is read majalah hiburan (entertainment magazines) and spend endless hours watching mindless TV dramas and game shows?

We need also to ask why there are so many entertainment-oriented majalah in the bookshops. Is it because it is easy to get KDN permits to publish one of these witless and vacuous magazines?

Sadly, even our stress on religious and moral education in school has not helped to reinforce our fear of God, our sense of morality, our family values and most of all our self-resilience. We can blame the way the religious curriculum is planned and taught. We can blame the quality and dedication of teachers.

But what have we to say about parents who beat their children to death? About newborn babies left to die?

And about fathers who rape their own daughters?

Surely we cannot blame the mothers who gave birth to these monsters. They were not monsters at birth. They became monsters because of the environment they grew up in.

Society must rehabilitate and protect the victims of these hideous crimes and the gallows seem not inappropriate for these killers and rapists.

And how are we to continue to take pride in the institution of marriage when it is more difficult and costly to get married than to pronounce the

talak (proclamation of divorce)?

We have laws, courts, judges and kadi who are supposed to protect us. But how do we explain the pitiful situation of thousands of divorced women who are left without any means of support for themselves and their children?

Yet the same laws, the same courts, the same judges and the same kadi think nothing of condemning and punishing these women when they are drawn into prostitution.

Surely a woman who is forced into prostitution to feed her children cannot be worse than a "respectable" member of the community who preaches goodness but makes millions of ringgit through corrupt practices.

On Wednesday, the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, declared war on social ills when he addressed an assembly of Muslim personalities at Pusat Islam (Islamic Centre) in Kuala Lumpur.

They comprised Cabinet Ministers, Menteri Besar, senior civil servants, heads of Federal and State Religious Affairs Departments, kadi, school principals and university lecturers.

I deliberately use the term "personalities" instead of "leaders" because I do not think I can, on behalf of readers, confer the title "leader" on everybody present at the meeting. It is best that I leave it to the people to judge who among them are leaders and who are not.

ARE we facing an identity crisis of sorts? Or have we lost our sense of responsibility as parents, political and community leaders, teachers and writers?

The answers may prove to be unpalatable. But the cure to our social problems can only be found if we face reality and swallow the bitter pill.

If we are not suffering a crisis of identity, how do we explain the prevalence of Malay youths among dadah addicts, Malay divorcees among prostitutes (or sex workers as some people call them), Malay teenagers among the bohsia and Malay schoolchildren among those indulging in lepak?

The percentages of Malays involved in these activities is higher than their contribution to the population. Some sociologists and researchers blame the occurrence of these problems to rapid urbanisation and the migration of the Malays to towns and cities.

Others say they are caused by the reluctance of Malay parents to communicate with their children on such matters as sex, smoking and dadah.

Yet others rationalise that some of these problems tend to affect the Malays more because, being Muslims, the Malays are governed by a stricter rule regarding what is right and what is wrong.

If indeed Malay parents in particular and Malaysian parents in general are reluctant or incapable of educating their children on sex, one wonders why this role is not taken over by the schools. Most of the children reach puberty while in school.

(My knowledge of the birds and the bees came neither from my parents nor from my teachers. Like other kampung boys, my knowledge of sex and reproduction came largely from watching the ducks, the goats, the cows and the buffaloes. Today, the more fortunate children get their facts on sex from National Geographic and the Discovery channel).

Bohsia and lepak are often blamed on uncondusive domestic environment - cramped flats and low-cost houses, quarrelsome parents and lack of parental supervision. If these are indeed the causes of the problems, are we doing anything to build larger low-cost flats and houses?

Are we setting up much needed facilities like playgrounds, sport or recreational facilities and libraries to cater for children living in council flats and low-cost houses?

What we often hear is the local councils and private developers taking

away playgrounds to build more houses, apartments and shopping complexes. When their playgrounds are taken away to build giant malls, why should we get too upset when they go to these complexes to lepak?

If we abhor divorcees engaging in immoral activities to earn a living for themselves and their children, what are we doing to ensure that their former husbands pay for their upkeep?

And why blame the video arcades, the discotheques and nightclubs for encouraging young people to smoke, drink and take dadah when it was the local councils that went gaga in licensing these establishments?

Some years ago, no abandoned bungalows in Kuala Lumpur would remain unoccupied for more than a couple of months without the City Hall granting a licence for them to be turned into discos and nightclubs.

Finally, people who are in the position to lead are more prone to pontificating than teaching. They speak of virtues and values while in reality they are neither virtuous nor value-driven. What has happened to the leadership by example slogan?

And before we rush to make more laws, rules and regulations to combat these social problems, let us be reminded by the US educationist, Marion Le Roy Burton, who said: "Character is formed not by laws, commands and decrees, but by quiet influence, unconscious suggestion and personal guidance."

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