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Columnists given latitude to be combative

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ONE of these days a book will perhaps be written about Malay newspaper columnists. In effect they are not just reporters of events or commentators dispensing words of advice, sometimes weighty and at other times less so.

On certain occasions there is venom, and animus is bared for all to see.

Like editors, too, they come and go. Lanang Sejagat and Wak Cantuk have gone to be replaced, among others, by CIA Malaysia in Mingguan Malaysia, the largest-selling Malay weekly.

The story would begin with Rahim Kajai, father of Malay journalism with his column "Wak Ketok" in Utusan Zaman and Ishak Haji Mohamad or Pak Sako with his "Hantu Raya" in those days of colonial rule before the outbreak of war.

Once conducted was a survey on the number of readers reading a newspaper's editorial. The answer: not really many.

And so it was that a panel discussion at Universiti Malaya earlier this week was told that readers prefer to read commentaries by columnists rather than the editorials.

As veteran journalist Tan Sri Samad Ismail explained it, columnists are given latitude to be combative, provocative and controversial. Hence their popularity.

Setting a record in the number of columnists in a daily newspaper is the Philippine Press. The Philippine Star issue of Aug 8, for example, featured 10 such writers commenting on a host of subjects ranging from La Nina to the country's relationship with China and the rights of dismissed workers.

A commentary by one Carmen Pedrosa criticised President Joseph Estrada's intention to employ an interpreter as is the practice of every Japanese Prime Minister. Quote: "English has been known to be the lingua franca in official Philippines ... he should just speak naturally and sincerely and never mind the grammar."

On the next page another woman columnist, Domini Torrevillas, offered unhelpful advice to men to shed Viagra. There was also her commentary on the proposed renovation of the kitchen at Malacanang, the presidential palace in Manila. The kitchen, yes, but not the entire guest house, she advised.

Setting the stage for discussions on the topic is the book Biar Putih Tulang by Datuk A. Kadir Jasin under the pseudonym Kunta Kinte. In it are some of the columns which he had written in Berita Harian from 1987 to 1995 on a wide range of subjects including Islam, democracy, the status of Malay rulers, Tunku Abdul Rahman and Lim Kit Siang.

As is known, Kunta Kinte was a character in Roots: Saga of an American Family, the book written by black American writer Alex Haley who later won the Pulitzer Prize. He had traced his ancestry through seven generations to Kunta Kinte, who was kidnapped in Gambia, West Africa, and brought to America in chains to become a slave.

Recorded elsewhere was an overnight stop by President Franklin Roosevelt in Gambia in 1943 during World War Two while on his way to an Allied summit in Casablanca. The story continues: "The chance to witness colonialism in practice confirmed his worst suspicions. The Gambian's average daily wage, he was told, was just 50 cents, his life expectancy 26 years, their cattle live longer..." This was more than a century after

Kunta Kinte was brought in chains to America.

After which mention must surely be made about another form of reaction towards slavery among blacks, especially black Americans and which has been described as Afrocentricity. Theirs is the premise that Egyptian civilisation of the Pharaohs was a product of the black population and that European civilisation is an offshoot of Egypt's. That, however, is another story. Kunta Kinte and fellow-captives had many sons.

The nom de plume chosen by Kadir then is in essence the antithesis of the slave mentality. In his introduction to Kadir's book, Samad touched on the central role of Malay journalists from the time of colonial rule to the present. Ever constant is the imperative to change the Malay mindset and to inculcate cultural values necessary for the upliftment of the Malays in order to attain progress in all fields of endeavour.

As expected when writing about the Malay identity there are commentaries on matters Islamic, including the passage of hudud laws in Kelantan and the lack of involvement among Muslims in welfare work.

Mentioned was an incident when a news reporter wearing coat, tie and songkok was asked to leave a Kelantan State Assembly meeting on the grounds that he was not wearing a Malay baju. Posed by columnist Kunta Kinte then was the question: "Since when did the Malay baju become an Islamic garb? What about the prayers of those Muslims not wearing the Malay dress whether in Malaysia or anywhere else around the world?" There was no answer.

Noted in passing was Kunta Kinte's strong criticisms against Tunku Abdul Rahman. But there was also his deep concern and regret over the lax attitude of government officials in sending Tunku for eye treatment overseas although Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had given his immediate approval with all expenses borne by the Government.

Another was the charge that DAP leader Lim Kit Siang was establishing a dynasty by appointing his son Lim Guan Eng to an important party position. And yet Kunta Kinte had pleaded for Guan Eng after the latter's one-year suspension by the Dewan Rakyat despite having apologised for his attack on MCA president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik.

As noted in his final piece on Feb 13, 1995, Biar Putih Tulang began in May 1987 together with a few written by others with such pseudonyms as Kamikaze, Si Kitol and T.S. Lanang which ended earlier. And so was posed a question by a panelist at the end of the panel discussion at Universiti Malay: Will not Kunta Kinte go back now?

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