

25/02/1998

Cultures in focus

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THE buzzword these days seems to be multiculturalism, though it's nothing new. Taken sometimes as a form of marginalism because of its ethnocentricity-in-diversity, multiculturalism has gained more respect in these more politically correct, post-modernist times.

A fine attempt to define, or at least interpret, multiculturalism in spirit and in form, has been made in an ambitious photographic project called Visions: A Multicultural Exploration of Malaysia and Australia.

The project started in May 1996 with three leading photographers selected from each country and assigned cross-border, cross-cultural tasks to train their lenses on facets of multi-cultural life, and capture the elusive nuances.

Apart from the set geographical limits, the photographers were free to shoot whatever came within their eye range, bearing in mind, of course, certain religious and race sensitivities.

The resulting exhibition toured various cities of the two countries starting with Kuching in October 1996 before winding up last August. The other whistle stops were in Melbourne, Kota Kinabalu, Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Adelaide, Canberra and Sydney.

The Malaysians were S.C. Shekar (Melbourne and Adelaide), Suan I. Lim (Sydney and Canberra) and Amri Ginang (Perth, Broome and Darwin), while Australia was represented by Peter Solness (Sabah and Sarawak), Lorrie Graham (Kuala Lumpur) and Emmanuel Santos (Peninsular Malaysia).

For practical reasons (funds, time and to avoid duplication), the lensmen fanned out to specific areas mapped out for them in this commando-like 10-day survey.

Though much was left to chance and luck, the photographers fortified themselves with useful information about the areas of their coverage before the first click of the shutter.

American-trained Suan, as she is popularly called, puts it most succinctly: "It was like a sociology course crammed into two short weeks."

In the editorial component of the project, two commentators, Datuk A. Kadir Jasin and Greg Sheridan, made investigative forays into each other's country, meeting up with ordinary folk and high-ranking politicians, and leaders in business, religion and community.

The essays are the products of independent research, analysis and reflection of their experiences and thoughts and not text written specially to supplement or interpret the photographs.

Kadir penned the incisive essay on Australia for the 128-page coffee-table book, commenting on the gastronomic opulence of choice. Sheridan "reciprocated" with a perceptive overview of the socio-political realities in Malaysia, and how modernity in the Info-Tech/Bio-Tech Age is adapted (and adapting) to the bedrock of Islam, the official religion.

Kadir is the group editor of New Straits Times Sdn Bhd, and Sheridan, the foreign editor of The Australian newspaper.

As Kadir observes, food provides a good indicator of Australia's multi-ethnicity. One of the best ways of getting to know a nation is through the stomach - each country has its own distinctive flavours and aroma.

It is interesting to note that while Australia is an East-West confluence of tastebuds, the Malaysian recipe is a more intriguing blend with Malay cuisine "re-invented", as in the lemak Nyonya concoctions, and Chinese yong taufu and pau (dumplings) given a nice Malay touch.

Then, there is the ubiquitous teh-tarik - an all-time favourite beverage among all Malaysians. And what about the truly Malaysian roti canai?

A curious bond is somehow felt when Kadir stumbles on the terung rapuh (a variety of eggplant) at Saeng Yodkhermarkul's restaurant in Darwin - a plant growing increasingly scarce and found mainly in the northern Malaysian border town of Changloon.

Experiences like this leave a lump in the throat as one reminisces on the past and savours the tradition that has faded away.

But no shots of such delectable culinary fusion appear in the book, though food photography is part of Shekar's forte.

The focus gravitates towards people - either individually with hints of their occupation or interest, and in their cultural environment, or as a study of contrasts, or even irony.

In Shakespeare's Macbeth, it is observed that there's no telling the mind's construction in the face. To the keen photographic eye as exemplified in this book, a face is a manifest of myriad emotions and qualities hinting at the character, gender, age/generation, class, ethnicity and culture of the subject.

In Ginang's shot of three children from a Muslim school in Perth, the adage that "clothes maketh a man" seems to hold true, while Graham's picture of an androgynous-looking teenager with close-cropped hair in Kuala Lumpur reflects a trend and urban suaveness (read Western influence).

Another Solness picture shows sexagenarian sisters Jaimah and Nadong Masat processing sago the traditional way (by stomping), their faces exuding their rustic simplicity and charm.

Communication seems to be the least of Madame Truong's worries as she and a friend rest on a bench at a park in Adelaide. They represent the NESB (non-English speaking background) groups.

Suan's black-and-white portraits are superb compositions, which are well matched by the coloured portfolio of Ginang. Of the Australian trio, Solness's flair for portraits shows.

Whatever the origins of the subjects, there is a sense of "placedness", of belonging. Take, for example, the picture of Idris, the Malay pearl-diver of Broome who has adopted aboriginal ways through marriage after he migrated Down Under in 1947.

Or Shekar's shot of two Caucasian-looking kids from Ballarat's Sebastopol Primary School preparing to go through the motions of the lion dance in conjunction with the Gum Loong (Golden Dragon) festival.

Some photographers have an obsession with superlatives - the first this, and the first that. Such as the picture of Nguyen Sang (the first Vietnamese Member of Parliament of Australia).

Or something of a rarity. Like the family of wayang kulit dalang (puppeteer) Kim, a Chinese who lives outside Kota Baru. This art form, which is derived mainly from the Thailaced Ramayana epic, is regarded as a preserve of the northern Malays.

The tension between tradition and change is well accentuated by Shekar's work of three women in different coloured purdah watching coyly through their veils an exhibition of veiled bodies by Fassih Kesio.

Not all pictures are prunella and gel. One on two Buddhist monks clad in saffron robes against a mural of the Buddha receiving enlightenment under the Bodhi tree reveals photographer Santos's guile. One of the monks is holding a cigarette while a small pin-up poster of a pretty woman is plastered on the top right of the picture.

Santos's shot of the new patriarch Chan Kim Lung, however, fails to bring out the Peranakan's obsession for the ostentatious and the minutiae, as the ancestral link tack is much less effective.

An inspiring effort by the publishers is the sandwiching together of the pictures instead of demarcating them by country. This interlacing also enhances the subtle ironies of multicultural developments and triggers doubts in some instances about the country's origin.

Another less obvious mode adopted is the pairing of pictures. Solness's picture of the heavily tattooed crouching elderly Iban craftsman assumes, 26 pages later, a different context in the "punkish" tattooed back of a shirtless youth found in Sydney's Bondi Beach.

It is often not easy to define something that is not homogeneous or absolute. For instance, what is the quality of being Australian? Is it because they live in Australia, have Australian citizenship, maybe even speak in the Australian accent? Or are there deeper as well as extraneous elements to it?

The book is as well designed as the photographs. Much of the credit for this goes to leading graphic designer-cum-typography expert William Harald-Wong. The cursive ascenders in Visions are inspired attempts at cultural pictorialism, and this "typesetting" is also imaginative in the "Australia" and "Malaysia" lettering on Page Nine.

The captions by Tan Joo Lee and Alphabet Soup certainly answer, without verbosity, many pertinent questions not possible in a photograph. Tasked with pruning the pictures submitted to a manageable proportion were Stephanie Strange and J. Richard Hsu.

This truly stupendous meeting of the mind, heart and eye of the Malaysian and Australian was the brainchild of project manager Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir, the AIDS activist who brought to the project her vast experience from the success of two major landmark photography books-cum-exhibitions - Malaysia: Heart of South-east Asia (1991, involving 46 world-class lensmen) and Eyes on Asean (1993). She was also the project co-ordinator for Over Malaysia (1992) and The Crafts of Malaysia (1994).

As Susan Sontag writes in her brilliant tome, On Photography: "To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge - and, therefore, like power ... To photograph is to confer importance."

* Visions, produced by Mosaïque Communications Sdn Bhd and Asialink, is available at all leading bookshops.

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