

03/03/2000

Decent restraint lost in culture of animosity

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SPEAK of culture and I reach for my gun. Thus was Hermann Goering, Reichmarshall and Hitler's deputy once quoted as saying.

Ironically, he forcibly collected valuable paintings and other works of art during Nazi occupation of several European countries in World War II. Nowadays, it is common for matters relating to culture and values, Asian vis-a-vis Western, for example, to be raised in various seminars and forums.

And so it was during the recent Young Malay Professionals Congress opened by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. Its importance in the context of the rise and fall of civilisations was mentioned in his address.

Quote: "The Malays have just emerged for 42 years as a modern and civilised race. In that period, a race that is dignified and respected has been moulded and developed. But it has not matured yet; it has not achieved the possible pinnacle. Unfortunately, there are signs that this young and weak civilisation will decline rapidly.

"Like other civilisations, success brings wealth and a climate that is different from the suppressing era under a foreign power. It appears that many of us believe we will continue to rule our own country and that our government will certainly protect and help it to develop.

"With this belief, we begin to go back to our old culture - the culture of getting satisfied too easily, the culture of fighting for power, the culture of animosity among ourselves.

"If this kind of cultural change is not contained, the new civilisation that we have just built will collapse. Considering that it is only 40 years, it may not leave any meaningful legacy behind. Our efforts in the last four decades since independence will come to naught."

A lesson in this respect could also be learned from Cambodia, fellow member of Asean, with its history of a Khmer civilisation which reached its apogee in the 12th century with the construction of the Angkor Wat temple complex.

It took 37 years to build, "its classical harmonies and sheer size evoking mystery and tenebrous emotions....shutting out the profane world," as a visitor once put poetically.

There was the description about 600 "bejewelled female dancers perfumed with sandalwood" performing to entertain King Suryavarma and later King Jayavarman, their palace courtiers and the populace.

In the end, however, it fell to Thai invaders in 1431 and everything was reclaimed by forest vines. As a historian later recorded the mighty civilisation once considered the most prosperous in Southeast Asia became an empire of jungle, stone and solitude.

Mention was made of Mount Meru, abode of Hindu gods in the surrounding area. Question: does the old Malay story about Mount Mahameru originate from it through Parameswara, first ruler of Malacca?

In the end the Malacca Sultanate too fell due to disunity brought about by envy, jealousy and struggle for power as epitomised by the epic duel between Hang Tuah and Hang Jebat.

Disunity and political power struggles erupted also later in Johor, Kedah, Terengganu, Kelantan, Pahang, Selangor, Negri Sembilan and Perak. Among those in power none showed sensitivity to social problems and the plight of the rakyat.

Instead there was arbitrary imposition of taxes and forcible conscription of the kampung people for the internecine fighting. Convened some five years ago was a seminar on the Malay mindset. One proposal called for the withdrawal of Malay rights and privileges from any Malay deemed to have deviated from the true teachings of Islam. Also proposed was the imposition of a 10-year jail sentence on anyone convicted of theft and a 20-year prison sentence on any person having sexual relations with a prostitute!

Published earlier was a story about several Malay intellectuals resident for a long period of time in Western cities while pursuing further studies.

All were said to have showed signs of a "common tendency to cry over their separation from home and to wallow in feelings of rindu". Each had written poems about their kampung and it was said that they "noticed little of the (host) country's physical, let alone such cultural and moral/spiritual landscape".

Once mentioned by a US diplomat based in Malaysia was the tendency among Malaysian students in general to socialise among themselves only and not also with American students and ordinary students, black or white. There was little interaction - much less rapport with their hosts.

And so it is amid the chorus of self-righteousness back home there are complaints even over the presence of just four Israeli table-tennis players in an international sports meet.

The virtue of decent restraint is lost in the culture of animosity and never-ending fight for power.

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