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Honouring our traditions

TODAY is the start of the Lunar New Year festivities. As Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad observed in his Chinese New Year message, this year's celebration is somewhat special because it is the first major celebration of the new millennium for us in Malaysia. We look forward to a harmonious and a fruitful Year of the Snake.

Irrespective of what the fortune-tellers would say about the new lunar year, we must resolve to do our best for ourselves, our families and our country. There are many challenges to tackle as we meander through the uncharted territory of the 21st Century. Among other things, we must equip ourselves with new knowledge and skills to embrace the Knowledge Economy. We have been told that the new millennium is unforgiving to those who are unwilling to change.

As we strive to improve ourselves we must not forget the positive aspects of our cultures, however. The Lunar New Year, as with other major celebrations in Malaysia, is an occasion when tradition forms the centrepiece of merrymaking. These are moments when customs are observed to the letter and a breach in the observance of any of these customs will bring displeasure from elders that will linger throughout the year.

Yet while many cheerfully go through the rituals and the customs, a growing number of Malaysians are growing up ignorant of what the traditions in their respective cultures are about or what they were originally meant to commemorate. Let us try to learn more about our own cultures and those of our neighbours each time we observe a tradition of great significance.

As we visit with friends during this season of cheer, let us find out why Mandarin oranges are exchanged or why hong bao are given to the young or, why Malaysian Chinese are encouraged to stay up to greet the new day on the eve of New Year's Day.

By making a conscious effort to find out about the cultural sensitivities of our friends and neighbours, we are keeping alive the legacy of our founding fathers - to live harmoniously and productively together. We must continue to utilise our diversity positively. We have built a firm foundation of mutual understanding and trust. Sure, there are rough edges to smoothen out but hiccups are part and parcel of any relationship. The important thing is, as the Prime Minister noted, every Malaysian is free to speak his or her own language and practice his or her culture and religion freely.

In multi-cultural Malaysia, there are numerous festive occasions to enjoy and even more events with diverse traditions and customs to honour. Rapid modernisation is propelling us forward at a pace which does not always allow us to pause and reflect upon the whys and wherefores of time-honoured practices. Occasions like Chinese New Year are a good time to stop and think why we do the things we do on festive days.

At Chinese New Year, as with other festivities that we celebrate, it is a rare family that does not make some attempt at a reunion. Chinese Malaysians are not the only ones making the balik kampung rush. Non-Chinese Malaysians are also taking advantage of the holiday season to be with their families. The balik kampung tradition and the uniquely Malaysian open houses make us feel grateful for being who we are. We wish our Chinese friends a prosperous Year of the Snake.

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