

24/02/2001

Talk your way out of differences

Dr Abu Bakar Abdul Majeed

TWO important events took place last week. The first was the publication of the initial analysis of the human genes, the mapping of which was completed in the middle of last year.

It is revealed that the total number of the human genes is approximately 30,000, only a third of the previously established estimate.

This is about 10,000 more than the number of genes of the little roundworm, 15,000 more than the minute fruit fly, 24,000 more than the teeny-weeny yeast and 26,000 more than the microscopic tuberculosis germ.

The findings of a smaller than anticipated number of genes in humans have forced scientists to think again about how to account for the much greater complexity of man compared to 'lesser' creations.

In a way too, the modest number of human genes has delivered a big blow to those intent on attributing their misgivings, misadventures, indiscretions, or everything else under the sun to the genes inherited from their forefathers.

Claims have sometimes been made that genes pre-determine fate or that a person cannot be held responsible for a violent act simply because "his or her genes made him or her do it".

For instance, from research findings that the percentage of Afro-Americans in prison is nine times that of white population, some commentators have concluded that genes are responsible for criminal behaviour.

This interpretation is, however, highly questionable. Most if not all of the racial profile in prison rates can be attributed not to genetic but to social factors.

The fact remains that Afro-Americans have to be content with a distinctly lower quality of life, are less likely to gain employment and often become victims of discrimination in arrests and convictions.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad too, has alluded to the subject in his book A New Deal for Asia (page 37).

The Prime Minister wrote, "There may be small genetic differences between races, but I do not believe this has any real impact on the opportunities for that particular race or country to prosper economically.

"Tribes and nations with distinctly different levels of cultural development or civilisation may come from the same ethnic group, and one group may be successful while another may fail in every field of human endeavour.

"The primary reason lies in the value system each group has developed. In other words, a culture compatible with success will succeed, while one that is not will fail."

If these arguments are still not convincing enough to some, then the latest discoveries in genetic science should set the record straight once and for all.

According to Dr J. Craig Venter of Celera Genomics, the private laboratory that successfully sequenced those 30,000 genes, there are indeed too few genes to account for behavioural traits of individuals hitherto considered to be hereditary.

Hence, it is highly improbable that homosexuality, infidelity, drug addiction and the tendency to self-destruct are something that is passed on from generation to generation.

In fact, these behaviours are mostly moulded through the nurturing

process as one grows up in the ambience of the family and society. Even clones with identical sets of genes are expected to behave differently, depending on how and where they are brought up.

The other important finding of the human genes analysis is that individuals are not very much different from one another. In fact the variation involves only about a tenth of one per cent.

Consequently, based on a total of 30,000 genes, we are different in only thirty of them. Imagine; these thirty genes are what make you different from Brad Pitt or Cameron Diaz, or Bill Gates, both physically and mentally.

It also seems that these 30 genes are sometimes enough to make people go for each other's throat.

The difference in the genetic make-up, too, can perhaps account for the perennial, yet mind-boggling, rivalry among academicians, theologians and politicians.

The worst consequence ascribed to the genetic differences in humans, however, is probably the enmity and antagonism among theo-politicians (theologians who double up as politicians), the result of which thus far has been quite destructive to societies and civilisations.

Millions of lives have hitherto been lost due to inter, as well as, intra-religious fighting.

Sadly, thousands if not millions more lives are already on the altar, ready to be sacrificed in the defence of some mortal interpretations of religious teachings.

Thus, it was timely that the second important event of last week took place in Teheran, a city that regards itself as the centre for dialogues among civilisations.

The International Conference on Dialogue Among Asian Civilisations was organised to seek a consensus among the world's leading cultures and traditions in creating a peaceful and harmonious society in the future.

It is also to be Asia's concerted effort at debunking the presumed imminent clash of civilisations between the Western, mostly Christian-based civilisation and Eastern civilisation, supposedly led by Islam and Confucianism.

The diversity of Asian cultures is seemingly great. But in essence there is a body of common values and beliefs that many citizens of Asia share.

In his book, *Asian values and the United States: how much conflict?*, David Hitchcock concluded from a survey in 1996 that there were six societal values most treasured by the East Asians (Japanese, Thais, Chinese, Koreans, Malaysians, Singaporeans, Indonesians and Filipinos).

They are, in descending degree of importance: public order, harmony, accountability, open-mindedness, freedom of expression and loyalty. In addition, Asians cherished five major personal values, namely; respect for knowledge, self-discipline, obliging others, personal achievement and professional success.

Contrariwise, the Hitchcock survey found that the six most revered values among non-Asians, represented by the Americans were: freedom of expression, individuals' rights, personal freedom, open debate, survival and accountability.

Personal values of American respondents in the order of decreasing importance were: self-reliance, personal achievement, hard work, achieving success in life, helping others and fulfilling obligations to others.

Thus, in general, there appears to be a distinct difference between the two communities, the non-Asians focusing more on "I", while the Asians on "We".

In view of the great number of differences among the world's population, the United Nations is encouraging dialogues to find common platforms.

Accordingly, 2001 is designated the UN Year of Dialogue Among Civilisations.

Thus, the culture of dialogue should be kept alive in this country, too. It would be sad indeed if in this era of sophistication two parties with noble intentions cannot sit together to thrash out differences and celebrate similarities. After all genetic science tells us that the former is only 0.1 per cent, while the latter 99.9 per cent.