

16/10/2001

The need for a new Malay treatise

Abdullah Ahmad

THE United States, I believe, spends more money than any other developed nation on education.

We also expend loads of money on education because both Americans and Malaysians need it more. No Malaysian should be without higher quality education in English, if possible.

As education is too important to be left solely to Cikgu or pendidik (educators), the Government should pursue a proactive, if not an interventionist, policy.

Though English (various levels of proficiency) is widely spoken in Malaysia, the majority, the Bumiputeras, speak little in English. They converse with each other in Bahasa or Bahasa rojak (Bahasa and Manglish).

A way must be found to make Bumiputeras irresistibly attracted to education. A fascination with knowledge will make them a new breed of Malays: hard-working, tough, competitive and high achievers.

Higher education came late in the history of Malays. In Bahasa, it only began in the Seventies. Malays only graduated from British universities in the Twenties. Malaysian Chinese and Indians, then as now, are miles ahead of them.

Even secondary education suffered the same fate. When the Malay College Kuala Kangsar (MCKK) opened its doors in 1905, the British expected it to fail because "the Malays would prove poor scholars with little aptitude for public service"!

The colonial government, as if to make certain it failed, provided a paltry sum, four-fifths of which were used to pay the salaries of the headmaster (William Hargreaves) and his staff. One of the classrooms was a converted fowl house.

So much for the seat of learning of the Malay royalty and aristocracy.

In my native state, English education only arrived a year before I was born, when the Ismail English School (now Sultan Ismail College) was established in Kota Baru in 1936. One of the pioneer students is still alive, Tan Sri Mohamad Ya'acub, a former Menteri Besar.

A cousin, Datuk Isahak Abdul Hamid, a British-trained lawyer, was probably the first among my relatives to acquire an education in English. He was Mohamad's contemporary. We had relatives who had gone for further education in Mecca long before adopting English to acquire knowledge.

Last Sunday, I addressed the Malay World Conference in Kuala Lumpur, and told the delegates that knowledge is all-powerful. Either they make its acquisition a life-long endeavour or they will suffer in all fields in a global village and even in Malaysia. The international conference was held to discuss, among other things, the definition of a Malay and Malayness or "Melayu dan Ertinya ke Melayuan". It was attended by 400 scholars from 11 nations.

Here is the gist of my speech:

"There is no man or woman in this hall or outside this room who is not proud of his or her roots. I would have thought today or perhaps in future gatherings, we should be writing 'The Malay Code of Success' like Zhu Zi did for the Chinese 300 years ago. The Malays need a new treatise to expound the importance of accomplishment.

"We should be moving beyond navel-gazing, in a world which has moved so fast that it threatens to leave us behind in our insularity.

"Whether or not a Javanese, a Mamak, a peranakan Arab or an Orang Asli

is a Malay, the matter has been resolved in the constitutional definition. There is wisdom in this because we will not come to an agreement on any other definitional basis.

"There are, in any case, too few of us to want to split hairs about the matter unless we want to be engulfed by the Indonesians. We have to be practical rather than emotional in this matter.

"Because while we are so busy looking for roots and the genesis of our race, others will be defining us in terms of our achievement and failure. An obsession with roots and racial definition would also be seen as a sense of insecurity.

"We will be better defined and respected by our success and achievement, here and in any other country where Malays reside. We are in danger of being defined by our failure.

"In the pursuit of Bahasa Melayu as the national language, culminating in the National Language Act 1967, we became emotional, obsessive and negative. We wanted to kill off other languages, especially English. This resulted in the closing up of the window of knowledge to many Malay students.

"Other races, or other Malaysians, because of their better economic circumstances and foresight, were able to keep and develop their proficiency in English and their mother tongue for better academic and professional achievement.

The Government has had to counter-compensate for this `loss' among Malay students by pouring in extra financial resources just to remove what was thrown away.

"Bahasa Melayu was, and is, able to withstand and develop side by side with other languages including the peerless English.

"True, there have been many accomplished young Malays, but this has only been made possible because of the National Economic Policy (NEP). We have not been clever, I must say, in the implementation of the national language policy.

"The NEP was designed to give the Malays an economic boost. While it has had its successes, it has not been an unlimited success; it is only a qualified attainment or realisation. Better opportunity has been mistaken for unending privilege and dismal performance.

"Economic participation and activity have been confused with the getting and trading of contracts, licences and permits.

"Political support has been taken to mean a position above the law, which only applies to others. Chosen entrepreneurs and business persons achieved success but kept it to themselves; with little trickling down effect.

"Successful Malay professionals have kept away from political activity and public service because they do not want to compromise their professionalism, which is their main asset.

"The inculcation of Islamic values was designed to make the Malays strong and confident to face the world. Instead, it has resulted in the Malays in many cases turning away from the world. We have fallen for the forms instead of the substance of Islam. Many have become hypocrites. We have generally ceased to participate in the multi-racial Malaysian community.

"We have been influenced by a sense of separateness, we have become judgemental and we have become antagonistic. We have also become foolhardy enough to fall into the trap of religious rhetoric, fighting in the battles of others who have never cared for our struggles and concerns.

"It is all right for us, among Malays, to look critically at ourselves to address our shortcomings to better ourselves. We should address the issue of achievement, where we have fallen and why.

"That would be a far better exercise than definition of racial stock. We should get together and not draw distinctions which will have negative consequences on the future of the Malays.

"We should harness our strengths and draw from the pool of those who may have secular or religious education; from those who are Malay or English-educated, at home or abroad.

"Malaysian domestic politics and diplomacy and foreign relations have been affected by political Islam. Malaysian politics, then and more so now, is a reflection of not only ethnic differences but also of an intense intra-Malay rivalry; both sides of the divide struggle for supremacy, each claiming to be doing more to protect and advance the race and religion.

"Malaysia, under Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, has championed Islamic causes in Bosnia, in Kosovo, in Palestine and now in Afghanistan.

"Let us today together make a vow or pledge devotion to the ideals which I have tried to animate, spur and arouse in you."

(END)