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Untangling the complex, collective psyche of the Malay community

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THE Bercakap Dengan Jin (Conversations With The Genies), a book which serialises Malay supernatural tales, written by one Tamar Jalis, was very popular among the community in the early 1980s.

The book is still being reprinted and continues to be sold in small bookstores and pasar malam, alongside new publications in similar veins.

These supernatural stories, myths and legends, especially those which yarn on Malay prowess, were once described by a veteran writer as a form of escapism for their listeners.

Whatever their merits, they caught the attention of Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

In his speech at the Umno general assembly yesterday, the Prime Minister pointed out that the Malays had apparently not learned much from their history.

Apparently the Malays easily forget their history.

"On the contrary, they love to colour their own history with legendary stories for their ego, to comfort and pride themselves in myths they have created.

"Thus they love to stress Hang Tuah's legacy that the Malays will never vanish from the face of the earth."

Reasons for the need to depend on these unrealistic elements to massage the Malay ego may differ.

However such concern voiced by Dr Mahathir is shared by most Umno leaders.

These legends tend to provide the Malays some semblance of comfort that when it comes to the crunch, someone from their own community, someone with certain powers, would come forward as a saviour of the race.

If the Malays care to reflect, such thoughts prevailed even in the nation's contemporary history - i.e. during the May 13, 1969, racial riots.

The Malays had then believed that there were silat (the Malay martial arts) masters who were capable of sending out parang and lembing terbang (flying machetes and spears) to wreak havoc among the enemies.

They also believed at the time that there were Malay leaders who were able to impart the powers of ghaib and kebal (invisibility and invincibility) to their youths to protect them from their enemies.

Many in the community still subscribe to such beliefs.

They have forgotten the more intrinsic, realistic part of history - the fact that they were saved from oblivion because the Malays wield political power.

They have forgotten too the fact that the Malay leaders had used that same power to impose the New Economic Policy blueprint which has managed to ensure the survival of the Malays in the economic life of the country and in education.

But these aspects of the nation's history are more than three decades old - considered quite a long period by some.

As pointed out by Umno Kemaman division deputy chief Ahmad Shabery Chik, the Malays had forgotten even a more recent history.

"Was it not just three years ago that in this very building (the Putra World Trade Centre) that the then US Vice-President Al Gore rudely snubbed our nation's leadership, the host.

"He supported the reformasi movement which was against the leadership.

"It was at that period too that the nation was under economic siege, being pressured into accepting the dictates of the International Monetary Fund.

"How many of us would remember that the country's leadership managed to overcome the economic crisis without having to beg from the Western-dominated agencies - which would have imposed rules that which have adversely affected the special position and rights of the Malays," he reminded his listeners.

What the delegate was trying to drive home was but a reflection of the frustrations felt by the Umno leadership over the amnesia suffered by the community in past and contemporary history.

But is it mere forgetfulness that has lulled the Malays into giving scant regard for history?

It has to be more than that. It is a case of selective memory - wanting to remember only things that suit their mood or preference of the moment.

Unless of course, the Malays are simply unable to grasp the rather more complicated issues: e.g. how real is the IMF threat? Or the efficacy of the NEP which has helped to ensure Malay survival in the nation's political gamut.

That somehow would be deemed a condescending view of the community's collective intelligence, especially when they are able to understand much more "complex" matters such as supernatural powers.

We can then come to the inevitable conclusion that the Malays simply refuse to remember history and see things in their proper perspectives because their minds have been clouded by hatred - a blind hatred for Umno and Dr Mahathir.

Then things begin to make sense and the whole episode is that much easier to decipher.

That, however, does not put things right - especially when the very person and political party detested by the Malays are still struggling for the Malay agenda.

That is not something foreign or uncommon in the Malay psyche.

Again, history had repeatedly chronicled how the Malays were capable of bringing about the downfall of their own kind in their anger and hatred.

History had also shown how Perak and subsequently other Malay States ended up being colonised by the British, merely because of the conflict among the Malays bent on securing political control.

These episodes of history showed how the Malays were prepared to lose everything to the British rather than allow their political nemesis to ascend the throne.

Surely these aspects of history could not be forgotten as they have been repeated, re-iterated and re-emphasised time and time again.

Then again, that sounds like a wee bit too much to expect from those who listen but do not hear; who watch but do not see.

Tamar Jalis' genies are still a better bet.