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In the heart of `Malayness`

Abdullah Ahmad

THE Malays are traditionally a reticent people and because of that, they have lost out and could suffer more if they remain close-mouthed. Disraeli said that increased means and increased leisure are the two civilisers of man: The Malays have only increased leisure but not increased means.

If I remain silent, we are one, but if I speak, we are two, and one could add to the Zen saying, "If we write, we may become many!" I spoke on Monday night at the International Conference on Malay Civilisation organised by Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris and rewrote it for publication today.

It was a timely conference as Arnold Toynbee said "civilisation is a voyage, not a harbour", and that includes Malay civilisation. Henry George, a 19th century American social reformer, remarked, and many people tend to agree with him, that what has destroyed every previous civilisation has been "the tendency to the unequal distribution of wealth and power". Here is an excerpt of the speech:

`To begin with, I might even ask if we fully know what we're talking about under the rubric of "Malay Civilisation". Was there such a thing, and what did it look like? Did we have it and lose it? Did we never have it? Do we have it now?

In Toynbee's terms, civilisation is a dynamic institution, a great human enterprise which generates highly sophisticated cultural elements, both material and spiritual.

Civilisation is not a static thing but a movement in the realm of ideas, ethics and aesthetics, religion and morality, social organisation and governance, innovation and technology.

A particular civilisation is outstanding when its achievements positively impact upon its people and the peoples of other civilisations for posterity.

Some Islamists are thus anti-civilisational. They want to wipe out everything, and begin their Year Zero, like Cambodia's Khmer Rouge, by obliteration and annihilation.

The cultural history of the Malays is at least a thousand years old. To find its origins, scholars might go all the way back to the first Hindu Kingdoms of the Malay Archipelago in the 8th and 9th centuries.

"There was no doubt that these were highly civilised roots for what has come down to us today as Malay culture. There was the intricate social order, stratification of society according to education and role, a religious emphasis on literacy, a functioning economy and the administrative cohesion that qualifies as a "civilisation".

What emerged in the 15th century as the Malacca Sultanate and later Empire was, even then, the product of 500 years' refinement of these ancient Hindu and Buddhist underpinnings.

With the concurrent arrival of Islam and its rapid and complete adoption by the Malays, the final and most durable layer of cultural identity was added to the rich and complex Malay psyche.

To this day, that fact of Islam being gilded onto Malay culture is perhaps seen to its greatest civilisational effect in Malaysia, where religious and cultural identity are now seamless, with each reinforcing the other.

Until the relatively recent importation of so-called "Islamism", which I regard as a result of the Islamic revolutionary fervour in the Middle East

of the Seventies, the Malays may not have seemed as overtly religious as they are today.

Malay women only began abandoning their sarung kebaya for baju kurung and tudung in the 1970s. I remember a time when there were only three Hajis in my kampung. Today there are scores.

But do not think for a moment that life for the Malays back then was more wanton and immoral than it is today.

On the contrary, the Malays cherished their air muka - or what the Chinese call "face".

There was a keen sense of shame, and the awareness that individual behaviour had to preserve community dignity.

That was a time when incest, adultery, promiscuity and rape were practically unheard of. Maybe adultery still happened - it would stretch credulity too much to think it didn't - but it was not considered normal or acceptable.

Tonight, if I may be allowed to exaggerate for effect (and effect only), religion itself is used to "rape". Religion is used to browbeat, intimidate, coerce and humiliate. This meets the classic definition of rape, which is a manifestation of power, not sexual desire.

I believe, however, that these new extremes of religious politics are a thin veneer on the true depth and integrity of Malay civilisation.

There are things about us that are a thousand years older than Islam, although we owe to Islam our modern ascendance and sustained fortitude of spirit.

This is my view. However, I know that many others might suggest quite the opposite: that between KeMelayuan or "Malayness" and Islam are deep conflicts, say in music, literature, theatre and dance, that have caused us to unnecessarily abjure many expressions of Malay culture as "un-Islamic".

In fact, given some of the more intemperate political issues of late, it would seem that the Malays have also begun leaving behind or abandoning what even their worst enemies had conceded for five hundred years as their great virtues; refinement of thought and speech, and elegance of manners.

True, as Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad noted in his book *The Malay Dilemma* more than 30 years ago, these very qualities had been refined to a fault, as it meant the Malays had grown too gentle; welcoming and accommodating of just about anyone who wanted to come here and make their fortunes from the land and waters of the Malays.

Dr Mahathir has subsequently spent his entire career trying to slap a little steel into the spines of the Malays.

There's no point in being generous and kind-hearted if it means people will come and take everything you've got and then attempt to take you, your family and descendants into bondage and servitude as well. But perhaps this drive may have backfired in some serious ways.

It would be a sad indictment of the Malays if their religiosity - obviously a cardinal element of their identity - should end up dividing their community and engendering cynicism among the young.

It would be even worse if we have torn out all the kehalusan - the refinement, elegance, thoughtfulness and grace of the Malay condition - and substituted it with a modern culture based on greed, self-interest and self-promotion to the exclusion of all else.

Is there such a thing as "Malay business"? Or is business simply business, to be measured by whether it is done well or badly, with profit or loss, regardless of whether it is Malay, Chinese, Indian or whatever?

And what about this use of English? Those of our earliest Malay scholars and men of letters who used Arabic or English as much as Malay were never less Malay for that, and nor are any of us today.

I'm speaking to you in English tonight, and I'm sure you not only understand my words but are quite capable of rebutting everything I say in the same language. Are you any less Malay, Chinese, Indian or whatever, for that?

It's high time we stopped upsetting our cultural applectarts on such matters as the choice of language. The ideal should be that every one of us is literate and fluent in everyone else's language. That may be intellectually impossible for most, but it should always remain the worthy goal of the use of language in this country.

These questions should be explored much more deeply, for my fear is that Malay culture - indeed, all our cultures - is most at risk not from being conquered by some other foreign influence, idea or force, but from the alarming dumbing-down of our youth.

We are reminded that youthful rebellion is usually a potent force in any society at any given time, and had it not been for Bill Gates's rebelliousness, there would be no Microsoft. True, but it does not follow that every youthful rebel with a pierced navel and unkempt clothing is a Bill Gates.

This is where the question of civilisation and culture distills down into a question of values. One of the outstanding elements of the Malay way of life emanates from the value system of the family and larger village community.

Marriage customs of the traditional agrarian society encouraged inbreeding, extending family and kinship to neighbours and sometimes the entire village and neighbouring villages. Family ties were strong and the support system therefore solid.

The onslaught of Western civilisation and ideas about the advantages of the nuclear family have not left the Malay extended family system unscathed.

Still, at the personal level I have been surprised again and again by the show of support from family members in times of great crisis or merriment.

City weddings and funerals (the two most important rites of passage in our lives) see the extended family flocking from their kampung strongholds to partake of the joy or join in the grief of a relation.

Well, is this a good thing or a bad thing about the Malay value system? And what about the spread of the Malay diaspora and the frequency of inter-marriages, in which cultural influences are blended and sentimentality reduced by distance?

For me, this is an aspect of Malay culture which sustains Malay society and buffers it against over-rapid modernisation. Our family value system is worth preserving and strengthening for all time.

I do not see that cultural identity is worn on the sleeve, but in the heart. Who and what you are is not measured in what you eat, wear and speak, but in how you think and behave. This is what we ought to be most concerned about.

The new Malay, bombarded with metaphors of opportunity, challenge, competition, corporate culture and globalisation, is, in the process, losing his spiritual stability, his "shyness" and "coyness" in dealing with matters of a more worldly kind.

Perhaps by delving once again into the essence and nature of Malay civilisation through history, we might remind ourselves of the enormous depth and breadth, the perils and prospects, of what it means to be Malay in the 21st century.

If so, I sincerely hope we will also see that the greatest threat faced by our civilisation is not external but internal, and might be summed up as the threat of mediocrity, complacency, apathy, meanness,

shallowmindedness and self-delusion.

Malay civilisation has withstood wave after wave of invasion and subjugation for a thousand years, and remains standing long after every erstwhile conqueror has vanished into history.

It would be the height of historical irony, then, for the Malays to now vanish from the world through sheer superficiality, incompetence and irrelevance.

That we should go not with a bang but a whimper, not through rack but ruin, not through conquest but sheer obsolescence - this would be the saddest epitaph for one of the world's greatest unsung civilisational success stories.'