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It's MILES better than before

By Rehman Rashid

AS with no other school on the justly-celebrated occasion of its centennial, doubts cloud the prospects of the Malay College Kuala Kangsar.

For all their citations in the footnotes of Malaysian history, in 100 years there have been only about 7,000 Malay College alumni. The 5,000 or so alive today may look back in pride on the history of the school where they spent their teen years being turned from young men into old boys.

But their view ahead is shadowed by the irony that the Malay College may well have spent the past 100 years diligently orchestrating its own obsolescence.

A century ago, the very idea of educating Malays was hotly disputed among colonial authorities. Frank Swettenham, no less, was against elevating the natives above their station. He bade his officers consider the "Bengali Babu", that buffoonish caricature of the White Man's Burden spawned by British education in India.

But the argument went to the less vainglorious likes of J.P. Rodger, Selangor Resident, and R.J. Wilkinson, Inspector of Schools in the Federated Malay States. There was duly established a school for the sons of the Sultans in whose name the British governed their Malaya.

While the British had come to see immediate and long-term benefits in attending to the intellectual development of their proxies-in-rule, the sultans could see the writing on the wall, and that it was in English.

Perak's Sultan Idris Murshid'ul Azzam, in particular, saw that the British would have to be dealt with, if not on their terms, at least in familiarity with them. Not 30 years earlier, his predecessor, Sultan Abdullah Muhammad Shah II, had been banished to the Seychelles for decreeing the murder of the first British Resident.

Abdullah's fate had shown Idris that the British could not be beaten by strongarm stunts, but would have to be argued down and outwitted. This meant learning their thinking, beginning with their vocabulary and mensuration, a.k.a. the 3Rs.

Thus did the Malay College, which for a time would be called the "Eton of the East", come to be in Kuala Kangsar, the Royal town of Perak. In the first week of January 1905, in a modest wooden house a 10-minute stroll from the banks of the Perak River, the school began producing the Malays' first clerks, lawyers and men of English letters.

But no matter what they looked like as finishing students in London, in their tweed suits, plummy accents and Victor Mature poses, they felt in full measure the impulse to self-determination that would lead to Malayan Independence in their time.

The Malay College did not fundamentally change the young Malays who passed through, as is commonly said, except in the manner of all boarding schools, by loosening the tethers of family and lengthening the ties that bind.

But this school would remove previously intractable impediments for the Malays, whether mired in the peasantry or marooned in the palaces, enabling its wards to be all they could be.

The British had looked to the Malay College to turn out staff for its Malayan Administrative Service. In meeting that objective, the school achieved the goal of all education, which is to activate potential and empower its fulfilment.

After World War II, as the British Empire disassembled and Malayan

sovereignty became attainable, the Malay College's meritocracy lent credibility to the leadership qualities of its alumni; earned on level-playing fields, genealogy irrelevant, and practised as assistant district officers, junior magistrates and schoolteachers.

Hence, in part, the natural ease with which, in 1946, aristocrat, official and MCKK man Datuk Onn Jaafar founded Umno, the United Malays' Nationalist Organisation, which would then marshall the Malays' rowdy uprising against the Malayan Union and shepherd it to democratic sovereign nationhood in scarcely a decade.

Onn would be elbowed aside on the way, but other MCKK men stayed firmly involved in the processes leading to Tunku Abdul Rahman's photo-opportunity of a lifetime in Merdeka Stadium on Saturday, Aug 31, 1957.

Among them was the second MCKK man to lead Umno, Tun Abdul Razak Hussein. As Umno's third president and the country's second prime minister, it fell to Razak to design and implement a new national contract after the Tunku's burnt to ashes in the race riots of 1969.

The Pax Malaysiana that has since guaranteed Malay survival through shared prosperity with the country's other communities was signed and sealed on a Malay College man's watch, and the rest of us are drop-dead proud of that, and in awe of him.

Of course, any conceit that only MCKK could produce Malay leaders of such calibre was thoroughly debunked in the Mahathir era. Tun Mahathir Mohamad was among those who did not care for the Malay College's hoity-toity pride in the disproportionate role it had played in the country's pre-Independence rule.

By the time he became the country's fourth Prime Minister in 1981, there were widespread reservations over the clubby ways of MCOBA, the Malay College Old Boys' Association, with its representation at the highest levels of the nation's economy, politics, governance and monarchy.

But MCKK men remained ambitious for over-achievement in the corporatising, privatising and massively expanding Malaysian economy initiated by Dr Mahathir, whose designated successor, what's more, seemed destined to ensure that Malaysia's fifth prime minister would be yet another MCKK man.

Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's initial upward mobility imparted a fateful inside-track cachet to a certain striped college tie, which by the early 1990s was appearing on Wednesdays in corner suites, boardrooms, corporate corridors and cronies' crannies throughout Malaysia, Inc.

Renong, builders of the North-South Expressway and the country's first Malay private-sector mega-corporation, was prominently helmed by young Malay College millionaires. When the company set up its head-quarters in the MCOBA building in Kuala Lumpur, the two logos together seemed to beam a quiet triumph, if not outright dominion, over the bustling highways below.

(At MCOBA's annual dinner in 1995, attended by more than 1,000 Old Boys, it was noted that the dozen of them seated at the Number Two table were collectively responsible for RM20 billion. That was the No. 2 table; the High Table being reserved, of course, for the Rulers, of whom two attended that year.)

Then the Asian financial crisis and the tandem plummet of the ringgit and Anwar's political prestige punched their lights out, and for a time MCOBA was a punching bag and MCKK a punchline.

That's all history, too, now. Dr Mahathir's retired. Anwar's out of prison. The remnants of the 1990s' conglomerates are under new management and doing business here and abroad. The country is in good enough shape for the Malay College to celebrate its centenary in all pomp and circumstance, in rightful recognition of the role it has played in the

making of this nation.

For what was once a single wooden hut is now a dozen universities and a thousand sixth-form colleges. In 100 years, the Malay College has gone from being one of a kind, to first among equals, to one amid the multitudes.

Fully residential schools have become anachronisms. The basic reason for their existence itself no longer exists, now that no child has to live a three-day walk from the nearest classroom. More pertinently, a boarding school's way of cultivating individual self-reliance may not accord with the family's central role in society. (National Service is an attempt at compromise.)

After 100 years as witness to and agent of this country's ascent from colonised servitude to prosperous sovereignty, the Malay College today wonders what would justify its existence for another 100 years.

MCOBA is therefore designing a new form of private-sector educational institution, to be raised atop the nation-building foundations laid by the Malay College in the past century.

It's called "MILES", for "MCOBA Institute for Leadership Enhancement".

Infrastructure is envisaged for somewhere in north Selangor; architect's drawings depict a steel-and-glass building vaguely evoking the Greco-Roman proportions of the Malay College's stately "Big School" in Kuala Kangsar.

But MILES is a K-economy concept, not entirely reliant on physical plant.

The institute's students and scholars will apply modern technology and teaching techniques to advancing the nation's intellectual development in all fields, regardless of which schools they attended, and no longer in the name of the Malays alone, but of our Malaysia.

With MILES, the wards of the Malay College hope to institute a mechanism by which the spirit and role of their alma mater in shaping the 20th century might survive the 21st.

This much of her should endure, we hope, even if the grand old dame herself fades into an unsung dotage in a nation where premium secondary education has at last become available to all, regardless not just of birth and breeding, but equally of gender, religion, and race.

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