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Another path, a different history

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METRO TV, a popular Indonesian television station, plays a very poignant music video clip in the late hours of the night.

Titled Hanya Airmata (Only Tears) and sung by child singer Amanda, the song is dedicated to the children of Aceh.

Some of its lyrics are especially touching, including: "Mentari pun tidak lagi ramah (the sun is friendly no more) ... malam pun tercabik oleh meriam yang tak punya perasaan (the night is torn by cannon that are heartless)."

The clip depicts a scene where Aceh children cry over dead bodies and another shows schoolchildren looking bewildered and lost when they arrive to find that their schools have been burnt down.

The clip is the story of conflict and war. It is the innocent and down-trodden children who are the real victims.

Yet, one conflict in Aceh was different.

In the Perang Cumbok the victims, or rather the vanquished, were the uleebalang, the aristocrats.

It lasted three months, from December 1945 to February 1946, at a time when Indonesia had declared its independence.

According to A. Rani Osman in his book Sejarah Peradaban Aceh (The History of Aceh's Civilisation), the conflict was a result of Dutch policy, which pitted the Acehnese against each other.

"It was the intention of the Dutch to drive a wedge between the ulama and umara (rulers). It was a painful tragedy for Aceh as it caused the deaths of many: ulama, umara and the intellectuals."

To many, Perang Cumbok was simply a case of the Dutch wanting the uleebalang to rule Aceh and not wanting the rebellious ulama, led by Daud Beureueh, to take over.

Its significance was deeper.

On Aug 17, 1945, the Indonesian nationalists led by Sukarno and Hatta unilaterally declared Indonesian independence after almost 350 years of Dutch rule.

What followed was five years of revolution and military hostilities with the Dutch colonialists, who wanted to reclaim the nation that they had been forced to leave behind by Japanese forces during the Second World War.

Britain and the United Nations Security Council intervened, and agreement between the Dutch and Indonesians was reached on Nov 2, 1949.

The Republic of Indonesia was granted complete and unconditional sovereignty on Dec 27, 1949.

According to the rector of Aceh's State Institute of Islamic Studies, Dr Rusdji Ali Muhammad, Perang Cumbok was significant in shaping the future of the province because it wiped out almost the entire aristocracy.

"They were the Aceh intelligentsia and their deaths left a vacuum in our community," he said.

Dutch writer Paul Van Veer in his book Perang Belanda di Aceh (translated version of Dutch War in Aceh) said:

"The civil war (Perang Cumbok) was also a social revolution that saw a massacre of the uleebalang.

"It wiped out all the uleebalang kin to the last male, the wives and children."

A. Rani believes this led to the vacuum in the Aceh community, for it

was deprived of the educated class, which was made up of the aristocrats.

"Many died in the war.

"Of the intellectuals and the educated ones from the uleebalang class who survived, many became fearful for their lives. Most left for other districts, hence depriving Aceh of those capable and with the knowledge to manage Aceh.

"History shows that Aceh started lagging behind after Perang Cumbok.

"If not for the war, Aceh may have become truly successful and its civilisation may have flourished," A. Rani wrote.

But Dr Rusdji believed that the conflict was unavoidable.

It was obvious that the uleebalang who formed the ruling class felt that they had to side with the Dutch to ensure their continued grip on power, and if they could not have it in total, then they thought they could share it with the colonialists.

"The loss of the intellectuals from the ruling class is truly felt," he added.

History seemed destined to repeat itself when Hassan di Tiro established the Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (GAM, or Free Aceh Movement) in 1976.

After about a decade of fighting to secede Aceh from the Indonesian Republic, most of the GAM leaders, Hassan included, had to flee the country.

Today they are settled in Sweden, which is now caught up in a diplomatic row with Indonesia.

That is, however, another story.

But the crux of the matter is, all of the GAM leaders living in exile are considered to be the cream of their community.

In short, another group of intelligentsia has left Aceh.

Discussing this with Dr Rusdji, a colleague who was present during the NST interview, pointed out how similar the Perang Cumbok issue was to Malaysia's own struggle for independence.

"It was also in 1946 when the Malays decided to unite under Umno and make a representation to the Malay Rulers that they not sign the accord to allow the Malayan Union to be affected.

"We were lucky that there was Datuk Onn Jaafar, who was himself from the palace.

"That helped in the negotiation between the Malay masses and their Rulers as Onn was someone who understood the psyche of the Rulers.

"Otherwise, it could well have been a head-on conflict had the Rulers refused to listen to the voice of the masses, but instead acquiesced to Britain's demands that they support the Malayan Union to ensure their position were not threatened.

"A Perang Cumbok, the Malayan chapter, could have been triggered," the colleague said.

On that score, rightly or wrongly, the Malays, through Umno, had managed to get the Rulers on their side and they, in return, did not put in any effort to derail the process to gain the nation's independence.

In fact, throughout the struggle for Malayan independence and for years after, relations between the Malay Rulers and political leaders were strong.

After Onn decided to quit Umno, the party brought in Tengku Abdul Rahman, yet again a member of the Royal house-hold.

Subsequent Umno leaders, Tun Abdul Razak Hussein and Tun Hussein Onn, were aristocrats themselves.

It was only when Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad took over that a non-aristocrat became the leader of the nation.

After more than two decades of independence, the need for an aristocrat or a member of the royal household to lead the nation had waned for by

then a strong middle-class had already been established.

It is a wonder that, given the extent to which the Malayan Malays were strongly influenced by Indonesian politics, Malaysia's history did not go any other way than it did.

Some may argue that Malaysia would have fared better had history gone a different route than charted by Umno.

It may well have, but that is mere conjecture.

The crux of the matter is simple - the nation should be glad that most, if not all, Malaysian children need not cry when thinking of their future.

And that they have more than just tears to share.