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'Be judicious over choice of culture and tradition'

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad told young professionals and entrepreneurs participating in the smart partnership dialogue here that they have to be judicious in adopting their choice of tradition and culture.

"I am afraid that we are under continuous assault now. We are being assailed with all sorts of culture through television, media, video, and the Internet," he said in a dialogue with members of Club 29, a club of young professionals and entrepreneurs from nations taking part in the dialogue.

In defining culture, Dr Mahathir said anything people did today would become tradition if they continued to do it for decades afterwards.

"As far as culture is concerned, it is something that we have inherited that gives us an identity and we don't want to lose our identity.

"On the other hand, we must admit that there are things that we have been doing in the past, which we have inherited, which will not help and, in fact, will be an obstacle to our progress."

Dr Mahathir said society must be able to evaluate tradition and culture in order to know whether it should be preserved.

"Our priority, of course, is to progress and to progress we have to do certain things not found in our cultural tradition."

"We cannot say although we can progress, our culture says we shouldn't do this thing, therefore, we will forgo progress ...that I think will be a very negative thing."

By tradition, for example, in most Asian societies, the wife must submit to the husband.

"If you have a husband who is suffering from HIV/AIDS, that obviously is going to affect the wife and children, too.

"At that stage, do you stick to culture or do you say forget about culture, forget about submission?"

"This is a glaring example but there are many others," said Dr Mahathir.

He said there was a need for society to discard and adopt new practices which over time may be assimilated into its own tradition and culture.

"You have to be judicious, you have to learn to evaluate what you inherit. You have also to decide for yourself whether this will be good for you or not.

"You may say that this is good for you, but 10 years down the line, we find that what we have decided is an obstruction or obstacle."

"Then, it should be discarded and we must start a new thing which eventually will become part of the culture and tradition of a particular society.

"What I will not approve is wholesale import of other people's culture and adopting it without thinking," said Dr Mahathir.

At one time, he said, the Afro hairstyle was very popular.

"It was popular because the whites in America felt guilty about the way they treated the blacks.

"So they wanted to identify themselves with the blacks but they couldn't paint themselves black.

"So what they did was to grow this Afro hairdo and we in Asia followed that.

"We in Asia should have never followed that as we have never done anything to the blacks, we are not guilty of anything so why should we do

it?"

Dr Mahathir said when evaluating culture that came from elsewhere, society would have to ask itself why it adopted one culture and not another.

"I don't think we are going to approve same-sex marriage or something along this line.

"I am sorry, I am not a Christian but I must say I am shocked when a Christian priest who admits to be gay is accepted by the congregation."

Dr Mahathir said the present society should not feel hurt if the culture that it has adopted was discarded later.

Later at a dinner, a tribute was given to Dr Mahathir as a Commonwealth Partnership Technology Management fellow who contributed immensely to the dialogue.

He was also introduced as the architect of Malaysia's progress.

In his speech, Dr Mahathir said Malaysia's economic progress had its cost.

"We are paying for that now," he said, adding that the air quality in Swaziland is very much better than in Malaysia.

"Malaysians have reduced smoking but we are breathing fumes emitted by millions of vehicles now.

"We were torn between wanting to breathe good air and having good cars. And we decided to have the cars," he said in jest in reference to Proton and Perodua.

"Swaziland should not take Malaysia as a model. We did a lot of wrong things.

"On the other hand we have done some good things," he said, adding that there was no better way for the country except to join in the smart partnership dialogue.

"We can exchange information and misinformation and choose what is good for us."

Dr Mahathir said he was confident that Africa would catch up with the rest of the world over time.

"You have good leaders who are going to take you to success," he added.

Dr Mahathir and his wife Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali later sang My Way to the applause of the participants.