

17/12/2003

Language, literature can resist globalisation

Anis Ibrahim

PUTRAJAYA, Tues. - Language and literature are strong markers of a nation's identity and can resist the erosion of culture from globalisation.

What, therefore, is the role of a national language in confronting the realities of the 21st century and creating a community proud of its nationality, culture and identity?

Professor of post-colonial studies and critical theory at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia's School of Language Studies and Linguistics, Prof Dr Zawiah Yahya, said this was the question she hoped would be answered by the end of a three-day conference beginning today.

"National languages and identities of developing post-colonial nations are under threat of being marginalised in the wave of globalisation, which privileges the English language," she said at the opening of the International Conference on Language and Nationhood: Confronting New Realities at a hotel here.

"While English has to be mastered as a global communicative tool, one's national language is also important. It is this balance we are aiming for. Language and literature can be used towards nation-building," added Zawiah, who is also conference chairperson.

UKM Vice-Chancellor Datuk Dr Mohd Salleh Mohd Yasin, who opened the meeting, said an essential part of nationhood was the notion of contribution to the nation's well-being and development.

"If individuals differ because of their personality and background, so does their concept of nationhood: In particular their ideas of who they are, who they ought to be and what they should do," he said.

The conference has attracted 300 participants from 23 countries. Former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad is scheduled to present his keynote address and close the conference on Thursday.

Among the plenary speakers today were Celcom (Malaysia) Berhad chairman Datuk Dr Munir Majid; Language Australia: National Languages and Literacy Institute chief executive and visiting professor of the University of Melbourne Joseph Lo Bianco and Nigerian poet, dramatist and critic Niyi Osundare.

In his paper entitled Language and Nationhood in a Time of Globalisation, Bianco said connecting language and nationhood was a recent practice of social formation.

"A national language is one that has both national (community) and state (political) connection. States have made the pursuit of singular national languages a key objective in the belief that unique languages would lead to unique nationalism.

"The view of nationhood has changed because of modernity."

Zawiah, who also presented a paper entitled Manufacturing Patriotism: Identifying the Tools of White House Rhetoric on War, examined terminology in four televised speeches by US President George W. Bush after the Sept 11 attacks.

"Events of Sept 11 have spawned uncritical rhetoric of patriotism and militarism across the US. Terms such as 'good and evil,' 'freedom and justice' and 'terrorism and jihad' are made to have effects beyond their meaning to garner loyalty and support for military action."