

All this race nonsense
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I am no sociologist by any definition or imagination. My good friend who is now a Distinguished Professor at UKM, is probably the most recognised sociologist in Malaysia; and founder or director of three Institutes at UKM. His current position is the founder-director of the Inter-ethnic Studies Unit at UKM. Therefore, if I make any serious mistakes with this column, I am sure at least he will correct me.

Recently, someone told me that the root word "melayu" actually describes the wilting process of a plant or flower. I then asked where did this word come from and why were the Malays (the English equivalent word) called such?

The closest answer I have received from a researcher is that there is a Sungai Melayu in Sumatra from which this sea-faring community originated. Therefore they were called Orang Melayu or Orang Sungai Melayu to be accurate. True? I do not know but I am floating these ideas so that I can be corrected if I am wrong.

How then did this one of 300-plus ethnicities of Indonesia become the "dominant race of Malaya?" After all in the Sejarah Melayu (which I have not read) I am told that the same thesis of the origin of the Melayu is also recorded.

So, why then did the British, or Dutch, or Portuguese create the Orang Melayu as a racial category and the Bahasa Melayu as the uniting language of the then-region called the Malay Archipelago and the Persekutuan Tanah Melayu?

And, even more so, why did the British craft into our federal constitution the 'Malay language and culture' as a formal definition of "Malays - as those who follow Malay culture and practice Islam?" This constitutional definition is what appears to now have been misapplied as the new racial definition for all and sundry, when in fact, premised on modern genetic science research, there can only be one race in the world; that is the human race?

Therefore, from 1957-1963 there were Malays, Chinese and Indians in Malaya as they were almost explicitly referred to in Article 153; and there was very little confusion as to who the 'constitutional Malays' are or, who were the 'other races'. But then in 1963, with the formation of Malaysia, the new nation-state became called Malaysia not 'Melayu-sia!'

Always only Malaysians first

Therefore today, we are always only Malaysians first, with our various religions second, and various ethnicities third, and so on. Finally, also because we are always part and parcel of the human race, the God-given human conscience makes us all part and parcel of the epitome of God's created animals.

So, why is there all this overemphasis on the so-called "Malay race nonsense?" Sure, we know who is and who is not Malay by the constitutional definition. All Malay Rulers are these without doubt. But, they are not of the Malay race by any definition. In fact, they each have a different historicity and are from differing ethnic origins. If I am wrong, can anyone please correct me? I do not think they can now choose to deny their history and past either.

Therefore, while PM Najib Abdul Razak may have not consciously and clearly defined his 1Malaysia in such ethnic terms; my simple and logical argument is that it really and only means we are only Malaysians first and foremost; with our religious affiliations second, and our ethnicities third. While both nationality and religions can be changed in the global world of nations, we do not allow for such a crossover only for Muslims in Malaysia.

Therefore, we condemned Lina Joy to migrate because of her faith. Ethnicities too, we cannot change, as God does not allow for it; and for those who try to do so, they may pay with their dear lives, as Michael Jackson found out.

Let me try therefore to apply the above logic towards the nation-state we call Malaysia. First and foremost, the word Malaysia is not a 'Melayu' word. It is an English equivalent for the Melayu peoples of Sungai Melayu in Sumatra.

This category of people, when mixed with other people groups (or ethnics) of Borneo (of which two states are now called Sarawak and Sabah) and Singapore; they all became called Malaysians. The concept of Malaysian is not an ethnicity but rather a nationality; much like the British or Americans (as opposed to Welsh or Irish or the American Indians).

That new nation-state definition includes all the original people groups (or ethnicities) of Malays of peninsular Malaya, Chinese of Penang (also an English equivalent of Pinang) and Malacca (or English equivalent of Melaka) and the Indians of the original rubber industry scattered all over peninsular Malaya but maybe mainly in Kedah, Perak and Selangor.

They also included the different Chinese ethnics of Singapore and all the different ethnicities of Sabah and Sarawak. For that matter in constitutional terms, the different Chinese and Indian ethnicities of Sabah and Sarawak are actually naturalised Malaysian citizens and should not have to apply for blue ICs by default.

The federal government, with due respect, cannot deny every natural Sarawakian or Sabahan this right and privilege which is only denied in peninsular Malaya.

A federation of three states

Now, let me further emphasise my nation-state argument. Malaysia is today a federation of three states; and not of thirteen states. The Agong is the Head of State for the Federation of Malaysia; and not just the Persekutuan Tanah Melayu. When he is the Head of State of the Federation; is he first and foremost an ethnic Malay by constitutional definition but is he is always first and foremost a Malaysian; like all the rest of us.

Only within the nine Malay States of the peninsular do we have Heads of a State who are both; constitutional Malays and the Head of Islamic religion in their states. My argument is that when they rotationally and democratically become Head of the Federation of Malaysia; they are always and by definition only a Malaysian first, religionist second and ethnic third.

The Agong as representative Head of the Council of Rulers of the nine Malay States and other Heads of State are therefore only symbolically of "the socially constructed reality" called an ethnic Malay by the Malaysian constitutional definition.

Consequently too, for example, the Sabahans and Sarawakians can ask in Parliament for the Agong to protect and preserve the practice of their religions; regardless of their particular form of faith, including those from

an Animistic faith.

And it is the job and responsibility of the elected Constitutional King of the Federation of Malaysia to do so because he is just not a mere Malay Ruler of solitary state but the King of the new nation-state; whenever elected to this portfolio, and never by lineage or birth.

Former member of Parliament for Kuching and now a contributor to Malaysiakini, Sim Kwang Yang summarised this well in his last opinion piece: "I am personally against all politics of race, because I do not think there is such a 'thing' as a real 'race'. Our polity is made up of individuals, and not of races. The concept of race has no ontological basis."

I fully agree! May God bless Malaysians to understand this.

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