

Why I am proud to be a Malaysian?

Malaysiakini.com

Sep 2, 2009

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Why I am proud to be a Malaysian? My nine-year-old niece's cerebrum fused when she read the title for her English composition homework, which she had conveniently forgotten about until a day before school was set to resume.

Biting the tip of her pen, she gazed intensely at the ceiling fan as if searching for the answers in the oscillating blades.

After a few minutes of deep contemplation, her eyes shone with excitement as she penned several lines about how the gastronomical choices in this country were simply delectable compared to what she had digested during her travels abroad.

Realising that a single paragraph would not yield much in terms of grades and this in turn would put her at risk of incurring her mother's wrath, she turned to her grandfather for help. At that point, the retired civil servant happened to be engrossed with a soccer match on television.

Annoyed by the interruption, he mumbled something about a cow's head which left her perplexed, and sent her off in my direction.

Appearing flustered, she approached me with book and pen in hand. Obliging, I wrote about racial harmony, and the diversity of cultures and religions, and some other stuff one would come across on travel brochures. She then cautioned me against using 'big words' like 'diver... city' as this would make her teacher suspicious.

Once the final touches were applied, she looked satisfied with the end result, closed the book and decided to break into a song to celebrate.

'*Negaraku, tanah tumpahnya darahku*', the national anthem reverberated through the living room as she dashed from one corner to the other waving a tiny Malaysian flag.

It was an appropriate song, for it was Merdeka after all.

It reminded me of how I used to croon the national anthem with much pride and almost a religious fervor when I was her age, when my innocence was still untainted by the harsh realities of the world of grown ups.

After having spent slightly more than three decades on this land, it now pained me to realise that the answers for the 'Why I am proud to be a Malaysian?' question had flowed from my brain and not my heart. It felt almost mechanical and devoid of any emotion.

Do not get me wrong, I love this country, but I often wonder if this country loves me. What made it even more heart wrenching was the fact that I had to struggle with this question on the day my country celebrated its independence from the shackles of colonialism.

The cow-head protest

On Monday (Aug 31), the 52nd Merdeka was celebrated.

And while the cameras capture its picturesque sceneries and diverse cultures to lure in tourist dollars, the reality unfortunately is quite different. Amid the deafening cries of politicians trumpeting messages of unity and conjuring up slogans of oneness, half a century on, the prickly issue of race relations continues to sting.

Now and then, events unfold to remind us that we have yet to transcend the boundaries of tolerance to set foot into the realm of acceptance. And now and then, the non-Malays are made to feel as if they are guests and not stakeholders of this nation.

Last Friday, one such incident unraveled in Shah Alam and many, Muslims included, felt that within 15 minutes, 50 years of progress and nation building came undone.

Amidst the towering structures and modern landscape of the city, a group of people, with children in tow, saw it fit to parade a freshly severed head of a cow through the streets in protest over the proposed construction of a Hindu temple in their neighborhood.

The presence of children served as a warning to the non-Malays, that even 50 years from now, their children, like my niece, could still be made to feel like outsiders as the seeds of divisiveness are sown in impressionable minds.

These children who watched their fathers stomping and spitting on a cow's head would return to school to learn about cultures and how the animal is considered sacred by Hindus. They would be taught about tolerance with textbooks talking of the friendship between Ali, Ah Chong and Muthu who visit each other's house during festive celebrations. 'Isolated' incident

A learned friend had pointed out that the fact that the protest did not lead to violence or acts of reprisal was reflective of our society's maturity. But one cannot help but wonder if it was maturity or rather fear that had kept the situation in check. He argued that it was an isolated incident and not reflective of how the Muslim community felt towards the Hindus. Fair and well.

But the nagging question is what if the roles were reversed? To quote Umno Youth chief Khairy Jamaluddin, who asked: 'How would you feel if non-Muslims burnt or stepped on the Quran to protest the building of a mosque?'

Would this have been regarded as an 'isolated' incident or would have the death toll surpassed that of the influenza A(H1N1)? Would the streets be now flowing with the blood of innocent people, who were not even remotely connected to Khairy's hypothetical protest? We hope not.

Chin Peng and communism aside, it is communalism that is threatening this nation. Race-based political parties and ideologies continue to thrive, luring even the brightest of minds, who set aside principles and beliefs, in the pursuit of ambition and power.

Speaking from a racial platform, these leaders proclaim racial unity, but come their respective party meetings or elections, they act no better than the 'cow head' protesters in an attempt to shore up support and secure votes. And I am not only talking about Malay or Umno politicians.

Even the so-called multiracial political entities fall into the same trap. Some of them are multiracial on paper but the racial composition of its members suggest otherwise. Internal

politicking in such parties are also carried out along racial or religious lines.

We also come across leaders of a particular race in multiracial parties championing issues related to their race while the others keep mum or break their silence after a week or two when it blows into a national issue and guarantees that some political mileage can be earned.

If this is not bad enough, reports of sub-ethnic discrimination or caste politics have also emerged of late.

As far as politics is concerned, the caste system is actually quite simple, elected representatives who serve the people (the higher caste) and elected representatives who serve themselves (the lower caste). There is the clean and there is the corrupt - with the latter often being the 'untouchable' as in hovering above the long arms of the law.

Tear down the walls

Everything appears to be unwell in this nation, from top to bottom and left to right. Slogans and smiling faces cannot heal the wounds when publications that spew gangrenous articles are allowed to poison millions of minds on a daily basis while the plug is pulled on those appearing to be critical of the ruling elite.

Tear down the walls, you say. But how can we?

What is the point of driving a sledgehammer into the walls when they grow higher day by day? How do we do this when the very same people tasked with ensuring that the walls crumble, provide the bricks and cement to the builders.

And is there any mystery as to why the more well-heeled and educated like my niece's parents toy with the idea of migration? While the rest of us are left to ponder about our lot with fear and apprehension.

What this country needs is a drastic shift in mindset which in turn would translate into a shift in policies. The latter without the former would not be sincere. In short it needs a mental exorcism to rid itself of the ghouls and demons of racism and religious bigotry.

The change would not come overnight. The rot is far too entrenched. But what is needed is the courage and the will to initiate the long process of transformation. Not just lip service. And the will must come from the top to execute the right, not popular, decisions.

And we, as citizens, each and every one of us, should have the courage to look into the depths of our souls, and slay the demons that lurk there.

Someday, when this same question is posed again 'Why I am proud to be a Malaysian?' I hope the words would flow from the heart, if not mine, at least from my niece's.