

Recognising the fiction that is race

The sun - 3/8/2007

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WHEN on a clear day you fly over the Nusantara, the island world which cradles what we call "Malaysia" today, you see the highlands slowly giving way to the lowland river basin, the coastline and the sea.

The transition is gradual, the colours changing from shades of green, brown and earth red to milky brown. The land dips ever so gently into water, the hues turning from pale yellow into sky blue-green. The eye moves with the continuous flow of interconnected colours and shapes.

Upon this land and seascape - the inseparable constituents of *tanah air* or homeland in Malay - have we imposed borders, fences, entry points, exit points and passport controls. Indeed, we can attribute a specific political character to the landscape only because of the maps that have been etched in our minds from our school days.

So much have maps shaped us that we believe the borders of nation-states to be incontestable truths. Surely we must know that these divisions are not god-given but human-made, the result of European colonisation followed by struggles for national independence.

In keeping with the national borders that cut through our expansive land and seascapes, we have imagined and instituted divisions between people by classifying them by race.

We box individuals and groups into types which we believe share specific attributes. What flows between them and others - shared attributes - are erased and we can only see the boxes.

Surely, you say, there are differences between peoples and these need to be acknowledged. Indeed, but what are they, and what really matters?

As we move across the borders, oddly it is not the colour, shape and size of the human being which is most striking or significant. It is language and culture.

As such, the aunty selling cut flowers breaks into a warm smile and offers discounts when I, a not-very-Chinese-looking person, break into a smattering of Hokkien.

The term "race" was first used in Europe to categorise plants.

When applied to human beings in the 19th century, a mock science developed wherein certain physical features were attributed with specific qualities.

This is not unlike the one-time belief in my family circles that a wide forehead was a sign of intelligence, a view which sat well with the many uncles with receding hairlines.

European colonial powers saw the world along racial lines and attributed gradations of intelligence and capability between peoples of different shades and shapes. Situating themselves at the top of the racial hierarchy, "white" was associated with the most civilised of qualities and "black" with the most primitive.

Yet, at no point in history did the race project work in simple terms.

Like the trees in the forest, human beings did not fall easily within neatly drawn lines. More often than not, race worked well when accompanied by force.

South Africa under the Apartheid regime is a fine example. A small minority tyrannised 80% of the population on the basis of race.

Malaysians are not as deeply divided by race as some would have us believe for we have not had the category imposed on us as rigidly or even as violently as in other societies. The occasional reference to the borrowed terms of colour are oddly out of place as we would find it hard to draw the line between the shades of skin we share in common.

Race is of a different order of violence in Malaysia but it is nevertheless a source of insidious problems.

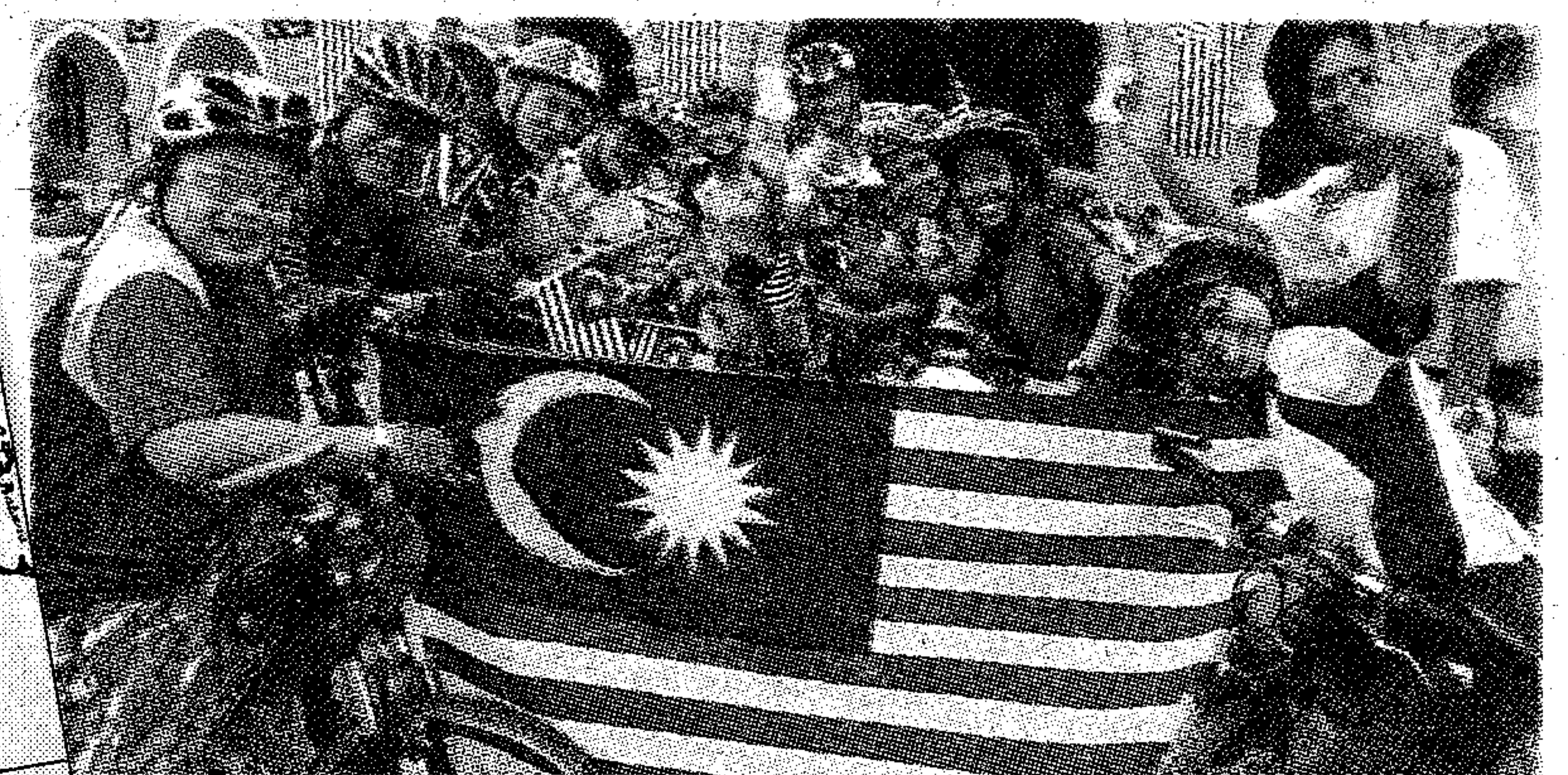
Race categories are cultivated as the primary means of participating in party politics and gaining access to certain kinds of government assistance. It also informs people's presuppositions, prejudices and fears. Religion competes or colludes with race to exacerbate prejudicial differences.

Some get it worse than others and it is here that we must pay attention.

With neither party political power nor a strong economic foundation, indigenous peoples are among the



Merdeka Babies celebrate at the Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Memorial in Kuala Lumpur last year. We may have differences but what are they, and what really matters?



Malaysian cyclists of all shapes and shades doing their patriotic bit to celebrate an earlier Merdeka Day.

most marginalised of communities. Therefore, it is not surprising when racist stereotypes are heaped on them rather than anyone else.

We shy away from the dehumanisation of indigenous peoples to our own folly. For so long as such racism exists it only shows up our potential to hurt ourselves. Anyone could become the focus of disregard, hatred and even violence.

The beauty and richness of our

social landscape has not been erased despite the deployment of race (and religious) categories in destructive ways.

As such, it is imperative not to squeeze ourselves out of our own history by continuing to recognise ourselves as members of different "races."

Fifty years down the road from independence, we could liberate ourselves all over again by being able to see how race is but one way in

which the world has been ordered rather than a certainty. While it would take much to banish race from our lives altogether, an initial and powerful step would be to recognise it for the fiction that it is.

By doing so, we unlock the diversity of shades and shapes in which we are enmeshed everyday.

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