

'Rojak pot' for a Malaysian identity

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THE forces of globalisation and the entertainment industry have the tendency of homogenising Malaysian youth culture. Young Malaysians, regardless of race, religion and geographical location, wear Levi jeans, eat at McDonald's, watch American movies, support British football teams and listen to the latest music from MTV.

Like it or not, western influences and pop culture has had a far-reaching impact on our young generation. Andrew Fletcher, an 18th century Scottish political thinker, has this to say: *Give me the makings of the songs of the nation and I care not who writes its laws.* In the eyes of our youth, entertainment celebrities are more popular than politicians and lawmakers.

However, the forces of globalisation and entertainment do not completely remove our Asian roots and identities. Our Malaysian identity is a unique blend of a rich Asian heritage and strong western influence. While we strive to maintain Asian values such as respect for elders, tolerance, communal spirit and strong religious emphasis, we also reach out to the outside world and embrace the larger global culture.

'Rojak pot' approach

In Malaysia, we do not subscribe to the "melting pot" approach of the US where all the various traditions and cultures are "melted" and meshed together to form a new American identity. Ours is more of a "rojak pot approach". In a rojak pot, you will find crunchy *keropok*, *tau foo*, *jambu air*, mango, papaya, *sengkuang* and cucumber mixed together with thick prawn paste, sprinkled with a generous amount of toasted, chopped peanuts. The various ingredients are mixed together but do not lose their individual characteristics. However, by being mixed together, the sum total becomes a new and better entity.

This is what sociologists term the "integration approach" juxtaposed to the "assimilation approach". With this approach, Malays, Chinese and Indians are integrated into a common society but the various races still preserve their distinctive cultural identities as an integral part of the Malaysian national mosaic.

Moving forward, how can we achieve a Bangsa Malaysia? I believe it is fundamentally important for there to be openness, frankness and sincerity as we discuss inter-communal issues. The underpinning concept is that of truth-telling, where we are able to speak the truth to each other in an objective and rationale manner.

The Federal Constitution is our social contract, the charter of the nation, so to speak. It is the blueprint for our pluralistic society.

There should be the freedom to engage in a discussion on issues of paramount constitutional importance.

Unless we can speak truthfully to each other, we cannot create a united and authentic Bangsa Malaysia. What we can achieve is perhaps a superficial and external form of peaceful co-existence that can easily be undermined by prejudices, suspicions and underlying tensions.

I say all this with one important caveat: freedom of speech must be exercised with great responsibility. Freedom of speech does not give us a right to hurt each other and to incite feelings of racial hatred and discord. It is to be used to tell the truth. But the truth must be under-girded with respect, or else the "truth" will be repulsive to the listener. Unfortunately, inter-racial and inter-religious tensions at times end up generating more heat than light. When cordiality is lost, truth is obscured.

Role of young Malaysians

All of us share the Malaysian dream. We cannot change the past but the future is ours to make. As young Malaysians, we need to grow out from our narrow communal concerns, and share and work together on a broader national agenda. Instead of harping on issues of racial marginalisation, we need to strive together to ensure that Malaysia is not marginalised in the competitive global race for economic development.

Instead of arguing about distributing the economic pie, we need to help each other to enlarge the pie for our common good. A growing economy will have a positive impact on enhancing the stability of a pluralistic society like ours.

On a micro level, we must learn to make friends with people outside our own racial community. Human relationships should never be based on skin colour. What is more important than what we say or do is what we think of each other deep down in our consciousness. The main question is whether in the secret chamber of our hearts, we regard people of a different race as equals in worth and dignity.

We must have faith in a common future together. After all, we are all in the same rojak pot called Malaysia.

Lawyer Wong Fook Meng presented this paper at the Young Malaysians' Roundtable Discussion on National Unity and Development in Malaysia organised by the Centre for Public Policy Studies (Asian Strategy and Leadership Institute) and the National Young Lawyers Committee (Bar Council) held on April 3 in Kuala Lumpur. Comments: feedback@thesundaily.com