

# When we lived as one

The Sun - 4/5/2007

## Comment

by Patricia Pereira

I GREW up in a small village called Kampung Kopisan Baru in Gopeng, Perak. This was in the 70s and 80s. My neighbourhood consisted of people of all races – Malays, Chinese and Indians. Most of the people in that village worked in the tin mines nearby and so they were not only neighbours but colleagues and good friends as well.

Here was a place where we could pop into our neighbour's house in the middle of the night and unashamedly ask for some food because we had unexpected guests. We could go off on a trip with the safe knowledge that our neighbours would keep an eye on our house without us even asking.

All the children went to the same school and they too were friends with one another. My closest friends in school consisted of people from all the different races and religions and we were so comfortable with each other that we'd often end up in one of the houses after school, doing our homework or playing

games. The parents would warmly welcome all the children into their homes and being respectful of one another's culture and beliefs, would ensure that the food served was acceptable to all.

There was no prejudice or fear in the way we interacted with each other. We saw and accepted everyone as our friends and all the elders always looked out for all the children, once again irrespective of race or creed. It was no surprise to see a Malay man boxing the ears of an Indian child who had misbehaved, only because he

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cared (it was an unspoken rule that the elders had a right to punish or scold any child who was caught misbehaving ... and this also meant a further punishment when we got home). At the same time, we would probably come across a Chinese woman gently applying ointment to the knee of a Malay

child who had injured himself while playing.

When there was a wedding in the village, everyone would be invited and all the women would come together to prepare the meal. It was joy to see all the Mak Ciks, the Achees and the Ah Sohs sitting

and chatting together while doing the cooking. When there was a funeral, everyone felt the loss and all would come to pay their respects and to help out in any way they could. The best time was during the festival season – trays of goodies would be sent to the neighbours with invitations to join them for lunch or dinner and this would be reciprocated when the neighbours celebrated their festivals. We respected one another's religion – there was a mosque, a church, a Hindu temple and a Chinese temple all within walking distance of each other.

In school, when the Muslim children were having their agama lessons, the non-Muslims were free

to go to the library or to the canteen. But most of us preferred to remain in class and do our homework. At the same time we would catch snatches of the lesson going on and the Ustaz or Ustazah would sometimes draw us into a discussion. They would ask us to explain about our religious beliefs or rituals and never once were we disrespected. In fact it was a learning experience for everyone.

Now when I look back, I wonder if it had all been a dream. Did we really co-exist in peace and harmony back then? Why I am having my doubts now is that after all these years, we are suddenly being urged to strengthen racial integration. Children regardless of

whether they are at primary level or university students have to be taught or persuaded to integrate with one another. Where did we go wrong? Who is to blame for all this?

Children as I know, are innocent. They are not prejudiced and can see beyond the colour of one's skin. However, they are impressionable and if we fill these young minds with hate and mistrust, then we have failed in our duty not only towards our children but also to the nation.

This August we will celebrate the 50th anniversary of our independence. Can we truly say that we have progressed these past 50 years or have we in reality moved backwards? Can we truly call ourselves Malaysians? This is certainly food for thought.

*The author is a 40-something single person who gives her perspective on life minus the rose-coloured glasses.*

*Comments:*

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