A club that bridged the racial gap

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■ By Rina De Silva
rinade@nst.com.my

Even at the ripe old age of 87, Suppiah Kannan still holds the club close to his heart and visits it often.

KUALA LUMPUR: Prior to Merdeka, the elders of the then Ulu Kelang New Village came up with a novel way to integrate the community: forming a recreational club.

The residents, comprising locals and immigrants, realised the need for the different races to get together, have meetings, play games and interact socially.

Thus the Ulu Kelang Recreational Club was established in 1956.

Residents in the area, which has since been renamed Kuala Ampang, continue to use the club up to this day.

One of the club's founders and first presidents, Suppiah Kannan, 87, said prior to Independence, the area was a melting pot of immigrants who had just arrived, those who moved from other squatter areas to escape the Communists and those who preferred the hilly and cool area.

"I moved there with my late wife Sulochana and four young children in 1956 and I was then working as a research assistant with the Rubber Research Institute.

"My immediate neighbours, the late Yap Seong Lim and the late Aw Teng Keong, were friendly but we realised that the other residents hardly talked or knew each other.

"That was when we decided to establish a club to create an opportunity for social interactions and for youngsters to meet for recreation and games," he said.

The first venue of the club was the Ulu Kelang Private School, which was also the home of another committee member, Yap Seong Lim.

"At the outset, many were reluctant to join the club, preferring to mind their own business. Then it became a place for meetings to discuss residents' issues such as water, cleanliness of the area, road conditions and clearing of drains," said Suppiah.

Soon, everybody knew everybody.

During Merdeka, there was a sense of excitement and Suppiah said the residents were also in a celebratory mood, even building a 30-metre arch proclaiming "Happy Merdeka".

When the club moved to its bigger present location in 1960, more people came to take part in its activities since there was a football field, a badminton court and opportunity to play table-tennis.

Weddings, social dances and festivals were also regularly held there.

Among the guests who visited the club were Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman with his deputy Tun Abdul Razak Hussein and cabinet ministers Tun Omar Ong Yoke Lin and Tan Sri V. Manickavasagam.

A Solidarity Rally was also held during the "confrontation days" with Indonesia, aimed at uniting the people.

Over the years, the late Mokhtar Dahari, Santokh Singh, Soh Chin Aun and Khalid Ali were among the football greats who came to play matches at the club, drawing crowds and thus making it more popular.

Former president Ten Foong Keong, 40, and current president Andrew Gopal, 44, got to know each other when they met at the club 30 years ago.

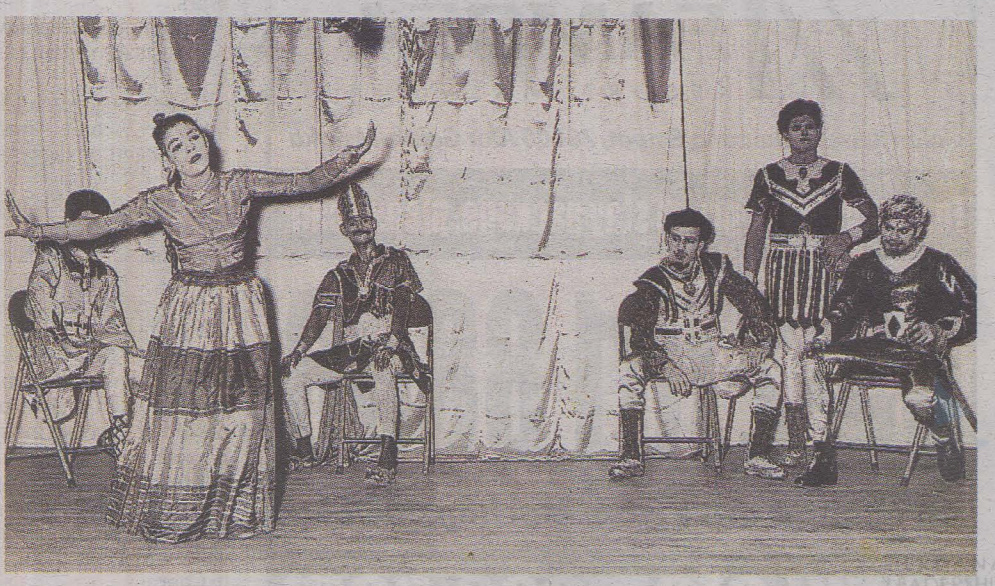
"We played football often," said Gopal whose parents were immigrants from Kerala, while Ten's parents moved to the area from Cheras.

The club has also had its share of problems.

In 2003, members fought tooth and nail with the Selangor government over the proposed development of a condominium at the club's football field. Recently it had to face vandalism issues.

The club's membership has grown from 40 in 1960 to its current number of 1,500, while the annual membership fee has increased from RM1 at its inception, to RM34.

The official opening of the club by Tun Omar Ong Yoke Lin (second from right), the then Health and Social Welfare Minister, on July 9, 1960. Ong is shaking hands with Ampang member of parliament, S.Y. Chan.



A cultural performance held at the club during Deepavali in 1963.