



Run-up to the  
**50<sup>th</sup> Merdeka**  
Celebrations

# SPECIAL



Uma showing her daughter Deva Kunjari the picture of Tun V.T. Sambanthan draping a tailor-made gold-threaded shawl on the country's first prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman as they recollected fond memories of the good old days.

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**W**HEN you see Toh Puan Uma Sambanthan in person, you just can't help but feel the warmth emanating from her. She makes you feel like you've known her for years, and will probably remind you of your mother or grandmother.

But she is no ordinary lady. She is the wife of the late Tun V.T. Sambanthan, one of the founding fathers of the nation who was MIC president and the first Labour Minister.

Till today, she often receives visitors who seek her advice and help. Sitting on a big oak chair, Uma, now 78, patiently listens to the plights of her visitors, just as she has been doing over the past 50 years.

Back in the late 1950s, Uma was more active. She fought for the rights of women as her husband joined forces with Tunku Abdul Rahman and Tun Tan Cheng Lock to help secure the country's independence from the British.

She is an engrossing storyteller as she relates events back then, but there is a tinge of disappointment in her voice when she talks about the way things are now.

Remembering the country's indepen-

## We fought as one

**In this article on the Merdeka Families, the wife of the late Tun V.T. Sambanthan, one of the founding fathers of the nation, recalls how everyone fought together for the country.**

dence is important, she stresses, but it is equally important to know what we Malaysians need to do 50 years from now.

"I clearly remember Aug 31, 1957, when the shouts of 'Merdeka! Merdeka! Merdeka!' resounded in the air.

"When the British flag came down and I heard the national anthem, I had goose bumps on my arm and tears welled in my eyes.

"Every time I think about it, I feel my heart racing. It is something you cannot describe with words and you will never forget your entire life."

Besides being a wife and mother, Uma also wore other hats including leading many women's causes.

She thinks very highly of the Tunku and has fond memories of the man who brought Malaya together.

"He was the chief master and always stressed that the multi-communal aspect was an important basis of the country," she says.

According to Uma, independence had been slated for 1959 by the British who wanted to see how far the locals could go.

"Tunku wrote to the British but they did not give him an appointment to discuss the date. One day, he dreamt early in the morning that he was standing on a platform and people were cheering all around. There is a belief that if you

dream of something early in the morning it will come true – and it did," she says.

Uma recalls Tunku telling Mohd Ali (Tun Dr Siti Hasmah's father) and Badawi (Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's father), a well-known Muslim scholar, about the dream and both advised him to ask that independence be given in 1957.

After that, Tunku and the other leaders worked hard to achieve independence and there was strong solidarity between the races, she says.

"We are very fortunate that our first leaders based the principles of freedom on solidarity of races, mutual understanding and working together towards a free country."

Uma recalls how everyone fought together for the country. "We were of different races but we never called ourselves Malays, Chinese or Indians. We were one."

After independence, the nation's leaders strongly emphasised the importance

# Marching towards the Merdeka parade

WHEN I think back of the momentous steps before the biggest day in the history of our nation, I feel that my contribution is but a grain of sand on the seashore.

I was 16 and studying at St John's Institution, Kuala Lumpur, and a cadet in the Federation of Malaya Air Training Corp.

A few weeks before Aug 30, we were told to present ourselves at the Kuala Lumpur Railway Station

for a dress rehearsal. The sergeant-major demanded we do everything right the first time round.

To prepare for the rehearsal and the actual parade the next day, we had countless drills on the grounds of the Old Airport that was situated behind a stretch of Chinese graveyard.

I had to cycle there from the heart of the city and it was my uniform that gave me the courage to

go through the graveyard. I would pedal as hard as I could in order to zip through without glancing left or right as I prayed that the spirits of the dead would excuse my intrusion.

So there we were just before dawn on Aug 31 at the railway station with our boots, belts, emblems and buttons polished and gleaming in the moonlight.

Our hearts were racing because

we wanted to be at our best for the first Merdeka Parade, marching through the Selangor Recreation Club and the Kuala Lumpur Clock Tower.

Although the occasion was 50 years ago, the excitement of the moment still gets to me. I recall the climax of the moment when we marched and swung our heads to the right when the sergeant-major bellowed "Eyes right" and

Where were you when Tunku declared Merdeka? Share your memories and pictures of this momentous event (or as related to you by your parents and grandparents) by e-mailing us at [merdeka@thestar.com.my](mailto:merdeka@thestar.com.my)

we saluted to the birth of our independent nation.

God bless Malaysia!

Kevin  
(via e-mail)

# Our people must stay united



'When the British flag came down and I heard the national anthem, I had goose bumps on my arm and tears welled in my eyes,' says Uma.

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of education because "we would be better citizens with the right education", she says.

Uma remembers the time the Government decided to ban the lion dance and racial tension was high after May 13, 1969. Tun Sambanthan, as National Unity Minister in the early 1970s, took some Chinese leaders to Genting to talk things over. The ban was later lifted because the Government realised it was important to maintain each race's culture.

"The youths of today and those born after 1957 cannot understand the struggles we went through. How many of them actually ask their grandparents or parents about what went on?"

Nevertheless, she says, what is important is to make youths feel welcome and respect them.

"While it is important to celebrate our 50th independence, we must not forget our current goals: Where do we want to be in the next 50 years? What can we do in the next 50 years to improve things for the next generations?"

"I want them to stay and feel the need to stay and not leave the country. Youths and children are our future generation. Don't talk down to them. Talk with them, help them understand and they will appreciate it. We have to give our kids what they need and make them feel secure."

Asked whether Tun Sambanthan would have been happy with the present situation if he were alive, she firmly says "no".

"He would have been disappointed. I am, too. There is so much polarisation going on. Solidarity can be fostered more. But I am optimistic that things will work out in the end.

"I say this not because I want to gain attention. I have already run my race.

"I need to say this for our future generations. Can they stand as one like their forefathers did?"

"Our founding leaders had a vision of the future based on multi-communal harmony."



Tunku Abdul Rahman and members of his Cabinet giving a press conference at the Cabinet Chamber, Kuala Lumpur, immediately after the Ministers were sworn in before His Majesty the Yang Di Pertuan Agong in 1959. — Arkib Negara Malaysia

**»Youths and children are our future generation. Don't talk down to them. Talk with them, help them understand and they will appreciate it«**

TOH PUAN UMA SAMBANTHAN

Sambanthan's daughter Deva Kunjari is full of awe of her parents and their contribution to the country.

"I am very proud and humbled to be their daughter. They have achieved great things for the country," says Deva, a lawyer.

On the country's 50th anniversary of independence, Deva says it's an unforgettable moment in history but, just like her mother, she says it is important to see to the needs of the future generation.

"This is our country. Children relate to things differently now. Show them that this is their country. We have to listen to them and find out what they want."



Tunku Abdul Rahman being introduced to Tun Sambanthan's six-year-old nephew during a Deepavali open house. — Filepic