

THE STAR

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# Celebrating Malaysia Day

Recently, leaders of various parties on both sides of the political divide on the peninsula have again suggested that more emphasis be given to Malaysia Day, so that the people of Sabah and Sarawak, too, will feel a sense of nationhood.

In a sampan, being rowed upriver, the little girl admires the tiger head tattoo on her father's calf. Her mother tells her it is a symbol of strength and courage.

"Ah, so that is why you married Apai (father)," said little girl wagging her finger.

The family goes to a bank in a small town where they deposit some money and the mother teaches the daughter "that money is not everything."

Flash forward and the little girl is a grown woman.

She is returning home late from work and her mother is worried. Over the mobile phone, the daughter assures her mother that "the person" she is with is Malaysian. In fact, he reminds her a lot of Apai.

The mother asks if the person is rich and the daughter answers: "Mother, didn't you always tell me that money isn't everything?"

In the background behind her head, the name of a local bank is prominently displayed, with the lit logo of the tiger's head.

It is a charming advertisement, unfortunately aired so briefly that many may have missed it. But its real charm lay not in the concept alone but that the conversation was conducted totally in Iban with English subtitles.



At last, the Ibans are coming of age, at least on national television. Starting with that ethnic group, perhaps other linguistic groups, too, would be drawn into the mainstream.

This was in the run-up to Malaysia Day. Compared with the effusive, elaborate, perhaps slightly over-the-top frenzy accorded to the Merdeka celebrations of Aug 31 all across the peninsula, the live telecast of the launching of the year-long Malaysia Merdeka celebrations in Kuching on Sept 10 was relatively low-key.

Resentment has been percolating in Sabah and Sarawak over the marking of Sept 16, as seen by some of their local press articles.

It was not so much that they wanted to observe Sept 16 instead of Aug 31 but that both should be celebrated equally, perhaps with a national holiday to mark the significance of the anniversary of the formation of Malaysia.

This year, their main objection

apparently was the slogan "50 years of nationhood."

"How can it be 50 years of nationhood when Malaysia was not even formed yet at that time?" said deputy chairman of Suhakam Tan Sri Simon Sipaon from Sabah at a youth workshop entitled *National Integration - Challenges Ahead* in the run-up to Aug. 31.

It was a sentiment echoed repeatedly later over tea by other participants from Sabah and Sarawak.

When founding father Tunku Abdul Rahman negotiated the formation of Malaysia, he characteristically gave his word that the ethnic groups would be treated fairly. He trusted the people from Sabah and Sarawak and they in turn trusted him.

Sabah leaders such as Tun Datu Mustapha Datu Harun and Tun Fuad (Donald) Stephens, as well as Sarawak's Temenggong Jugah anak Barieng, were not just his contemporaries. They were his friends.

"Thus, a lot of things were not written in black and white," recalled Datuk Amar James Wong, former president of the now defunct Sarawak National Party and the only remaining survivor of those involved in the Malaysia Agreement talks.

The importance of Sept 16 to the people of Sabah and Sarawak was raised in September last year when

Culture, Arts and Heritage Minister Datuk Seri Dr Rais Yatim urged Sabah leaders to bring up their request to make the day a national holiday to Cabinet.

Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak had said then, as he reiterated this month, that even though Sept 16 was a very important day, Aug 31 would remain the country's apex celebration.

Recently, leaders of various parties on both sides of the political divide on the peninsula have again suggested that more emphasis be given to Malaysia Day, so that the people of these two states, too, will feel a sense of nationhood.

But feelings of marginalisation run deeper than the resentment that is felt when manifestations of their culture are used merely as a tourist attraction.

The feelings arise from the perception that state rights embodied in the 20-point agreement have been slowly whittled down over the decades. They also see federal leaders treating Sabah and Sarawak as just another state in Malaysia.

Today's Sarawak and Sabah leaders insist they are not. The two states became independent within Malaysia but formed the new nation as equal partners of then Malaya. They were not absorbed into Malaya to

become an expanded Malaysia.

In Keningau, the indigenous Murut and Dusun, who had initially resisted the idea, have put up an "oath stone" to commemorate the state's decision to form Malaysia. And each year, the local people renew that pledge, hoping that the federal government will reassure them by upholding its part.

Nostalgia is precious. It is warm and comforting, like a family album of beloved heroes and never-again achievements. It has its place in the hearts of all Malaysians because the indignities of colonial rule were felt by all the people on both sides of the South China Sea. The fight against that "common enemy" was a shared struggle, whatever the date.

For a nation, turning 50 is not just a burst of fireworks. It marks the first thoughtful strides towards the future, with purpose and direction.

As a reflection of that maturity, how gracious a mark of solidarity it would then be if six years hence, when Malaysia turns 50, its citizens were to celebrate Sept 16 as THE National Day, while Aug 31 forever remains as Merdeka, our day of freedom.

For our brothers and sisters in Sabah and Sarawak, it would be the single, most significant sign of integration.

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