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**A wise soul once said that within our past lies the reason (and, hopefully, the answer) to our problems. If that's true, there isn't a more important time than now to relearn our history.**



Men of history: (From top) Former journalist Naharudin Haji Ali, historian Tan Sri Dr Khoo Kay Kim; former Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman



# Shaped by events

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**W**e were very brave," muses 73-year-old Naharudin Haji Ali, or Pak Din, as he shields his eyes from the sunlight that was reflecting off the vast, green expanse of Dataran Merdeka.

He is referring to the not-so-distant past when the country's first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman took to the podium with upraised fists.

It is, to the average Malaysian, a compelling image - an image that's deeply lodged into their psyches from looking at a lifetime of grainy, black-and-white photographs and videos. But that is as far as their knowledge of the day's events goes. Not so with Pak Din, however.

He was right there when it happened.

"The nation had been in a state of emergency since the 1940s because of the communists. There was curfew on that day, and the rule was that anyone who was out after 7pm would be shot upon sight. But my friends and I didn't care because we were all very keyed up.

"We stood waiting on a dark field along with hundreds of others, waiting for Tunku to appear. When he did, all the lights on Dataran Merdeka came on and the Malaysian flag went up," recalls the freelance speaker for the Malaysian History Club.

"When the event ended at about 1am, it was already too late to go home because there was no bus. Many of us had no choice but to sleep on the field. It was simply named Padang then. We slept on any available surface we could find, on the grass, the concrete, everywhere."

Looking at his frail, stooped posture, you'd never guess that Pak Din was an influential figure in his time, a belligerent journalist who was not afraid of shooting off controversial questions, so much so that he was once

banished from a press conference by a furious politician.

Today, he is addressing a group of a few hundred students on a programme called Jejak Warisan Merdeka organised by the National Heritage Department. To give them a better idea of the events leading up to the birth of the nation, the students are given a tour of sites such as Dataran Merdeka, Tugu Negara and the Tunku Abdul Rahman Memorial.

But their blank faces give them away.

One student, Hor Ka Wai, 15, probably spoke for the others when he shrugs and quips: "History is one of my least favourite subjects. It's all about the names, dates and places. I'm only studying it because my parents expect straight A's from me."

Not surprisingly, the day Tunku made his declaration as the British stood on the sidelines means little or nothing to this generation. Although it happened less than a century ago, so much has changed since then that the past seems all too distant.

Underscoring how different life was in 1957, Pak Din says: "Then, the tallest building, Loke Yew, was five-storeys high. One sen could buy you a piping hot plate of *nasi lemak*. And entry to the Royal Selangor Club was restricted to the elite few. Oh, everything's so different now."

## Tall tale

Next stop, Tugu Negara. Even the tallest of students is dwarfed by this national monument, which depicts Malaysia's victory against the communists. They stare up at the hulking tin-and-copper faces of a few blackened men, pondering their significance.

Similar thoughts run through an adult's mind: How relevant is it to today's fragmented society? What do these kids see? What lessons can we learn from it?

To student Nor Shazana Beseri, 15, the

monument was created to honour those who had fought for our country and to instil a sense of allegiance to the country. But that is as far as her knowledge of it goes.

The Tugu Negara, according to Pak Din, was an ambitious project in its time. It was commissioned by Tunku, who was greatly impressed by the Sands of Iwo Jima Memorial in Washington DC and had approached its sculptor Felix D. Wieldon to construct a similar monument for Malaysia. It cost the government RM10mil, a vast sum of money back then.

When it was finally unveiled in a grand ceremony in 1966, the guests *ooohed* and *aaahed* over the exquisitely engineered scene of Malaysian soldiers standing atop a mound of lifeless Communists. Incidentally, what many don't realise is that this is an idealised version of the truth.

"The government started out with one battalion but later had to expand it to seven. Truth of the matter is, we weren't strong enough to fight the Communists so the British had to import soldiers from Africa, India and other Commonwealth Countries. So victory wasn't entirely ours to claim," says Pak Din.

There is a lot more that history books leave out, claims historian Professor Emeritus Tan Sri Dr Khoo Kay Kim, 72.

"There are so many mistakes, so many omissions," he says, referring to secondary school textbooks.

"When I ask my students what they know about Independence, they tell me 'Oh, we fought the British and we threw them out'. That can't be further from the truth. The truth is that it isn't really 'Independence' we have



Above: Tugu Negara was commissioned by Tunku at a cost of RM10mil; (left) the Tunku Abdul Rahman Memorial. — SHAARI CHEMAT/The Star & BERNAMA

Hor, frowning, as he scanned the sculpture for likeness. "But I guess people saw what they wanted to see. It's been that way since day one."

### Separating man from myth

been celebrating since 1957, but the creation of a nation state."

Sovereignty, states Dr Khoo, was already with the Malay rulers.

"The British were already planning on pulling out. It was only a matter of when. The lowering of the British flag during the Declaration of Independence was all just a show."

Khoo, a young man in his 20s back in 1957, did not attend the Independence Day rally because he had bigger plans.

"I wasn't interested in the celebrations, but rather in preparing for the changes that would happen after the handover. So my friends and I enrolled in local universities because we knew that they would soon need locals to fill up the gaps left by the British in the civil service.

"We were very concerned, you see. But little did we know that 'Malaynisation' was inevitable, even in the civil service."

Another point to note, asserts Dr Khoo, is that the British weren't as manipulative as they were made out to be.

"There were many false accusations levelled against them. For instance, that they divided and ruled. This is an incorrect statement because it was the British who had set up government quarters so that all races could live and work together. The jobs they gave were merely based on the ability of the people. In fact, I doubt our public infrastructure would be so good without the British."

But this brings up a whole new set of questions. Namely, how significant was Tunku's role in nation building? Or did he play a role at all?

"Of course, he did," says Dr Khoo. "The British wanted to leave only after the threats of Communism were wiped out, but Tunku accelerated this process. He united the people and made progress possible."

The Tunku phenomenon was so strong at the time that the Tugu Negara became an object of national interest. For a while, Malaysians debated if one of the soldiers (the one grasping the flag) on the monument was modelled after Tunku himself.

"I don't think he has Tunku's face," says

even as Caesar.

His name is also deeply entrenched in the country's pop culture, from short stints as a fiction writer and a producer for *Sumpah Mahsuri* as well as allegedly the most expensive film ever made in Malaysia, *Raja Bersiong*.

In a way, films provided Tunku with an avenue to express his own pent-up creativity, even if it meant taking a playful swipe at his own royal lineage in *Raja Bersiong*, a fantastical parable set in pre-Islamic Kedah about a king who had a taste for blood.

This boyish quality made Tunku "a magnanimous man in politics", according to Dr Khoo.

"Tunku wasn't a very diligent student (he had to struggle a bit to obtain his law degree), but he made a great prime minister," says Dr Khoo. "When he was the chancellor of University Malaya, a bunch of students took the liberty to protest against him. But he just shrugged it off and said 'Let them do it. They are just naughty boys. They will grow out of it.'"

Another interesting fact: Tunku was a sports lover, so much so that he specially commissioned the building of Stadium Merdeka for the Declaration of Independence.

"We used to think that sportsmen were the most trustworthy and charismatic of the lot. That's why the number one requirement to be a policeman then was that you had to be an athlete in school. These characteristics were especially prominent in Tunku," says Dr Khoo.

This isn't to say that there weren't any other model politicians at the time.

"History books did not mention the remarkable contributions of S. P. and D. R. Seenivasagam, who are actually founders of People's Progressive Party (PPP). Both brothers were lawyers, but they used up their father's money in an attempt to assist the people for free. They died very young, and thousands of Chinese turned up for their funeral in Ipoh," Dr Khoo says.

"That's the thing with history. Kids nowadays are missing the whole point in a mad scramble to score A's. The past may be gone, but without it, we might not understand why the present is what it is.

"It has always been Tunku's dream to unite the races. If Tunku had his way today, we would all be helping each other, regardless of racial differences."