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Lasting legacy

A child grows up with a personal perspective of his Prime Minister.

Stories by ANDREW PONNAMPALAM

It was a time of history known as the "Swinging Sixties". It was a time of global freedom, counter-revolution and social change. Apart from the Beatles, moon landings and swamis from India, the world was undergoing major changes.

In Africa, 32 countries gained independence in that decade alone. In Europe, the Cold War was intensifying and the Iron Curtain was being drawn across the continent. In the United States, the Vietnam War dominated headlines as the Kennedy era began and then ended.

In Asia, China was undergoing tremendous internal change; Japan was embarking on its post-war economic miracle, and South-East Asia was worried about the possibilities of the Domino Theory of communist expansion.

As a tiny tot growing towards adolescence, Malaysia seemed, to me, an oasis of peace and harmony in the midst of such global upheaval. Much of this was due to the country's beaming benevolent leader, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj.

His throaty silken voice floated from the large valve radios that dominated the living rooms of most homes, issuing announcements and warnings with steady authority, and dispensing encouragement and motivation with a fatherly chuckle or two. Images of him flickered on the screens put up by travelling units of Filem Negara, proclaiming independence at Stadium Merdeka, confronting Chin Peng in Baling, charming world leaders at the United Nations, and meeting native chieftains in Sarawak.

In person, Tunku Abdul Rahman seemed larger-than-life, his regal bearing embodying his royal lineage, and his height accentuated by a tall songkok set at a rakish angle. Although he donned a Western suit when the occasion called for it, he seemed most at home in the traditional Malay baju, with long sarong folded high at the waist. He was someone the Malays would describe as *mudah senyum*, meaning an amiable person with a ready smile.

As a child, I noticed that this genial person grew serious every time the national anthem was played, and not a muscle twitched as he stood ramrod straight until the final notes had died out. I noticed, too, that the adults around me shared the same solemnity, as if they had some grave memories in common with the Tunku when they heard the *Negaraku* being played.

Only decades later, as an adult, did I begin to comprehend the suffering and sacrifices the people of that generation had experienced as they followed Tunku Abdul Rahman on the complex, painful and difficult path to independence, democracy and successful nationhood.

Nobles and labourers, rich and poor, educated and illiterate - they had trusted this man with their lives, and he had led them safely to a place of peace and prosperity. Until today, Malaysia is one of those very rare nations that threw off the shackles of colonialism and achieved self-rule with almost no bloodshed or violence. It gained independence through diplomacy and the persistent but peaceful insistence of its people and their chosen leader.

From my parents at home to my teachers at school; from the local travelling *imam* in his old jalopy to the sunburnt ice-cream vendor with his *tikam* wheel, the adults around me shared a deep love and admiration for the prince-turned-politician whom



Larger than life: Tunku Abdul Rahman had a regal bearing that embodied his royal lineage, and his height was accentuated by a tall songkok set at a rakish angle.



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Tunku believed it was possible to wield power with grace, govern with goodwill, exert authority with dignity and enforce the law with love. They called, simply, "Tunku".

Malays, Chinese, Indians - they all harboured an abiding affection for our first Prime Minister. Even the most vocal opposition activist waving the red bull head flag of the Socialist Front or the lightning symbol of the PAP avoided any criticism of Tunku, often stridently decrying government policies while quietly confessing to a grudging respect for the man himself.

Those parties are long gone from our political landscape, but the legacy and memories of Tunku Abdul Rahman live on. It is an enduring testimony to a man who believed it was possible to wield power with grace and to govern with goodwill, to exert authority with dignity and enforce the law with love.

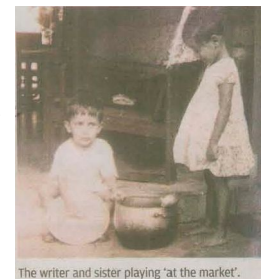
When he died on Dec 6, 1990, Malaysians



Malaya: The writer's father and neighbours after Merdeka. Malays, Chinese, Indians - they all harboured an abiding affection for our first Prime Minister.

from all walks of life thronged Parliament House to pay their last respects. The sky was gloomy and a light rain was falling; while thousands braved the rain outside, the cheeks of those queuing indoors were wet with tears.

I learnt more of Tunku's lasting legacy at this funeral. A grizzled army veteran beside me was mourning visibly. When I tried to comfort him, he turned to me with profound sadness and said in polished old-fashioned Malay: "I am an old man and today I grieve the death of my leader. But you, young man, should mourn the passing of the way he governed. Never again will we see a Prime Minister who really loved his people with his heart, and governed with such goodwill. Those days are gone, but you must never forget what he has achieved for us."



The writer and sister playing 'at the market'.