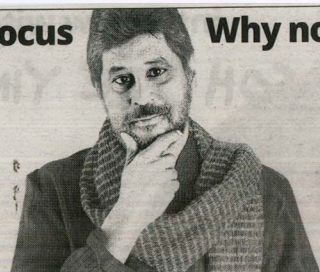


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Why not? Dorairaj Nadason

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# Malaysia, the one we knew

raj@thestar.com.my

There are increasingly loud voices in our country that want to amplify our differences. How far we have deviated from when we cared for each other almost as one big family.

HOW did we come to this? A religious teacher spews divisive rhetoric, a feeble-minded Facebook user talks rubbish about religious obligations on Hari Raya, another FB user derides as devils religious pilgrims.

Why, it's even wrong, according to one politician, to don the traditional costume of another community. And there are those who cry foul that Muslim prayers are held along with Hindu and Christian prayers for the ground-breaking of a building. It is the Indian Association. There are Indian Muslims, Hindus and Christians. Respect for all is wrong?

Meanwhile, that same religious teacher wants people to boycott food products processed by the others.

What next? Different supermarkets for those of one religion and those of others? Are we so intolerant of each other that we have to sit at different tables even when we eat?

It seems to be heading that way. Even in my beloved Penang, where that religious teacher is also from. The Esplanade "canteen" used to be a favourite haunt. It was a huge circle of glorious Penang food. We mingled, taking in the sea breeze (and sometimes the foul smell) and just passing time together.

Not any more. For some time now, it's been divided - partitioned into two. Now, my home-ground - the Padang Brown food court - is heading the same way. Renovations are under way and the walls are coming up. Soon, it will be "them" on one side and "us" on the other, with the wall to keep us apart.

There are those who believe that is the right way to go. Not me. I don't want to see Malaysians divided.

It did not use to be that way. Just a stone's throw from Padang Brown was Ah Chiak's shop, a Chinese kopitiam. Outside it, itinerant hawkers sold Penang's famous fare - char koay teow, koay teow thng, hokkien mee (that's prawn mee to you Klang



**Dwelling on differences:** The Padang Brown food court will soon be divided by a wall to separate stalls frequented by those of different religious beliefs.

Valley folk) - and inside the shop was the anchor tenant, my friend Ariff and his father who sold the state's other famous fare, nasi kandar.

The shop would be full of men - I don't remember any women - Malays, Chinese, Indians. Food from the stalls and the nasi kandar shop were on the tables. Yes, char koay teow and nasi kandar on the same table. It would be an unimaginable horror to some today, but it was a sight to warm the hearts of anyone who believed in our Malaysia.

The men sat sipping coffee, soft drinks and even alcohol while having their food.

My father would have his coffee from his cup and I'd get my share in the saucer. He would be with his friends, the old Malay pakcik and the apek who would sit in that quaint style - somehow managing to have one foot on the chair and the other on the ground while working away furiously with his chopsticks. And they would talk about how Ali Bakar headed in the winning goal for Penang at nearby City Stadium the night before.

In another Chinese kopitiam just doors away, a man with a limp sold the best mee jawa in town - "capek" mee jawa, everyone called it - and again all would share tables. He had beef soup and prawn soup, depending on what you preferred. And yes, there was beer on the table, too.

Those were the days - the days when Shahul Hamid was one of my best friends. No, not Shahul Hamid Seeni Mohamed, the cleric who was caught on video teaching his followers to dislike each other. This Shahul Hamid was among the band of boys in the area. There was Ishak, another Indian Muslim, Ariffin, Ismail, Zainal, Ah Tat, Ah Ho, Ah Seang, the odd-Eurasian Andrew Sjoeker and many others.

We spent hours in each other's company, playing all sorts of games. Everyone's house belonged to each other. We would walk in and out as we pleased. The mothers would look upon each kid as their own.

We played football together. The Muslim call to prayer served as the final whistle. When it was heard, the action would stop.

Come Hari Raya, this mother of a friend would pull me and my Hindu friends aside. "You boys sit here and eat. I have made mutton rendang for you. You don't eat the beef," she would say. Chinese New Year, Deepavali, Christmas, it was all pretty much the same.

We understood and respected each other then. We cared for each other. What has become of us? Is unity becoming a bad word? Or is it just a loud minority that's the problem?

The Indian-Muslim preacher has apologised. He admits he should have known better as he is of Indian stock.

There is a story I like about an Indian-Muslim lad whose best friend was a Hindu. The Muslim lad - the son of an imam - would spend most of his time outside the Hindu temple because his friend was the son of the temple priest. The Hindu had a tuft of hair (kudumi) at the back of his head, the Muslim wore his skullcap. They never noticed the difference between them.

The Muslim lad's grandfather was honoured in the temple because he had dived in and



saved the idol when it fell into a tank during a procession. The two young boys played together and sat together in class.

One day, a new teacher came and decreed that a Muslim should not sit beside the Hindu. He ordered the Muslim boy to move. Both boys cried.

Tearfully, they told their parents about it. The imam and the priest, along with the local Christian priest, summoned the teacher. Children are not to be separated by religion, they told the teacher and ordered him to apologise.

The two boys embraced in joy. This tale has been told with great relish by the Muslim lad after he grew up and became famous. His name? A.P.J. Abdul Kalam - poet, philosopher, nuclear scientist and now former President of India. His friend was Ramananda Shashtri.

There are those in Malaysia now who would cringe at such a tale, of a boy of one religion being so close to one of another. Me? That is exactly what I would like to see. A day when we discard our differences and embrace each other. Not them and us. Just us. As Malaysians. I yearn for those days - the days when Shahul Hamid was my friend.

> The writer, who can be reached at raj@thestar.com.my, believes that despite politicians and those loud voices that keep harping on differences, Malaysians by and large are still the same old friendly lot.

Food brings us together  
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