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less Malay?

"We do not have that right," Syahredzan said, "because to define what is Malay is something that is very difficult." How right.

According to DAP's Dyana Sofya Mohd Daud, a Malay with liberal thinking or who is secular does not make him less of a Malay. Similarly, those influenced by Arabic and Western culture.

But, I still remember what was said at the Umno general assembly 10 years ago, when Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who had just become prime minister, gave a sobering reflection on the subject in his adjournment speech, saying Malays were religious, but tended to resign themselves too much to fate and could be very superstitious.

"They believe in Islam," he said, "but they also believe in ghosts and other nonsensical things, helped by some Malay newspapers that play up stories about five-legged cats and three-legged chickens, which they believe bring good luck.

"They believe in ghosts and seek the help of spirits to achieve something. This even happened in the Umno elections. I have been told that some Umno members went up north looking for something. Don't do that, it's not wise."

Abdullah then referred to Frank Swettenham, the British colonial governor at the end of the 19th century, who had given a penetrating rundown of what is a Malay in his book, *The Real Malay*. Among the many amusing things in the book is the observation that a Malay "is fond of borrowing money

and very slow in repaying it. He takes an interest in the affairs of his neighbours and is consequently a gossip".

Yes, that still holds some truth till today, as study loans remain unpaid and even athletes' attire becomes a talking point.

Of course, Swettenham's views could be dismissed as a mere evaluation applicable to that time by a foreigner. But, the British official was known to be very perceptive, apart from having very close relations with the locals when he was in the Malay states for more than 30 years.

However, the passing of time certainly has had an effect on many aspects of Malay-ness. For instance, some families nowadays are so Anglophile, they speak with a stiff upper lip, spend a lot of time in England, have tea with scones and exchange presents on Christmas.

Arabic influence plays its part as well, and this has led to the death of some common features of Malay practices. The *bersanding* at weddings is slowly being phased out and so is the *joger* dance. The *kebaya* is being replaced by the *jubah*. And the greetings? As the fasting month begins, it is no longer *selamat berpuasa*, but *Ramadan al-Mubarak*, and not *buka puasa*, but *Iftar Ramadan*.

Even the good old *selamat pagi* is being slowly taken over by *assalamualaikum*.

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