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'EDITH OF MALAYA'

'INCLUDE SYBIL IN HISTORY TEXTBOOKS'

She's one of the many unsung heroes of our history, says professor

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LAST year, Google catapulted Sybil Kathigasu into the spotlight by dedicating a doodle to the wartime nurse on her 117th birthday, which fell on Sept 3.

As a result, Sybil's name became one of the most trending searches of that week and with it, her epic display of courage gained global attention.

Sybil's refusal to yield to Japanese soldiers who tortured her for information on resistance fighters earned her the George Medal for courage in 1948.

Time magazine, in 1948, referred to her as the "Edith of Malaya" after Edith Cavell, a British nurse who was executed by a firing squad for aiding the escape of allied soldiers during World War I.

Sybil and her husband, Dr Abdon Clement Kathigasu, operated a clinic in the small town of Papan, on the outskirts of Ipoh, Perak, where they covertly supplied medicine, and provided medical services and refuge to resistance fighters for years until their capture in 1943.

The couple also surreptitiously

shared information gleaned from BBC broadcasts on banned shortwave radio sets.

Sybil's lips were sealed even when Japanese soldiers hung her 7-year-old daughter, Dawn, from a tree with her hands bound and a rope tied around her chest with burning coal placed under her.

But Google's doodle on Sybil might be the only highlight of what she is remembered for, as the history syllabus in public schools continued to remain oblivious to her contributions nearly 70 years after her death.

The National Professors Council's head of the history, heritage and socio-culture cluster Professor Datuk Dr Teo Kok Seong said it was high time that History textbooks were reviewed to include Sybil.

He said the review could be easily done by researching her memoir, *No Dram of Mercy*, as part of the five-yearly schedule

for updates and it would not take much time or funds.

"It's a shame that she is not mentioned in textbooks.

"(The late) Sybil's contribution is big and the least she deserves is an unvarnished account of her deeds."

"Sybil is also one of the many unsung heroes of our history.

There are also underrated figures, such as Yap Ah Loy, who is widely regarded by many as one of the founding fathers of Kuala Lumpur, but is barely mentioned beyond a paragraph in textbooks," added Teo.

He said Sybil, being a woman of minority descent, could also become the poster girl to push for a more balanced representation of all races in the Malaysian historical narrative.

"The Education Ministry should strive to strike a better balance in the representation of minorities by doing a review.

"It will also bring change to the historical narrative," said Teo.

He further said the review should be done within the Malaysia framework to serve as an impetus to engineer social change.

Teo said history advocates could also open up social media for discussions on the subject, using it as a platform to pitch who students should learn about.

"Malaysians can put up petitions and vote for icons like Sybil to be included and suggest names. Political will can also swing in favour of causes like these if there are strong social media campaigns," he added.

Parent Action Group for Education chairman Datin Noor Azimah Abdul Rahim said the "democratic" review would be a vital step in making the subject less snooze-worthy.

She said people would be excitedly debating and pitching ideas on figures and events they felt the next generation needed to know about.

"Frankly I think all students have had an overdose of Parameswara and the old Malay sultanate," said Azimah, referring to the founder of Melaka.

"History is not dead or stagnant. The fact that they can review Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics means that they should be doing it for this subject."

"(In this case), acknowledging Sybil in the syllabus sends a good message to students that credit will be given where it's due in Malaysia and that all races helped build the nation," she added.

Azimah said honouring Sybil



Sybil Kathigasu is the only Malayan woman to receive the George Medal award for bravery. She was decorated during an investiture in London.



Dawn Kathigasu at age 11. She was 7 when she was hung from a tree by Japanese soldiers who poured burning coals under her and threatened to burn her alive if her mother, Sybil, did not speak.

ident Elizabeth Cardosa said Sybil's fortitude against the circumstances of the Japanese Occupation, her subsequent incarceration and torture should be recounted on every possible level.

"There should be no excuse of not having enough information to include Sybil in the annals of Malaysian history," she said.

She added that documentation available included Sybil's memoir and oral histories. Her old shop-house in Papan, which is now a museum dedicated to her, also served as a valuable resource.

"The question of its inclusion in our national history is one of how it fits into the official national historical narrative."

Former history teacher Chan Cheng Huat said while the final say on including historical figures in the syllabus rested with the Education Ministry, social media campaigns could tip the scales.

"If the campaign works, then the whole syllabus should be reviewed after weighing the contributions of Sybil or anyone society feels deserves recognition."

"There is no need to hire external consultants; it has the resources to do so in the Curriculum Development Division and it can always run them through experts such as Professor Emeritus Tan Sri Dr Khoo Kay Kim for an assessment," said the National Union of the Teaching Profession executive council member.



Professor Datuk Dr Teo Kok Seong



Dr Abdon Clement Kathigasu and his wife, Sybil.

Badan Warisan Malaysia pres-