

Meaning of Merdeka and M'sia Day

As Malaysians, it is important for all of us to understand the historical significance of these days.

LAST week, my 11-year-old daughter Apsara asked me what Merdeka was. She was preparing for a Merdeka-themed drawing competition at her school.

"What is Merdeka?" I asked her back.

"Basically, it is about freedom and unity," she said. I nodded.

On her iPad, she drew her interpretation of Merdeka. It was a yellow star with wings coloured like the Malaysian flag on its sides.

I asked her why that symbolised National Day.

"The star usually stands for hope. In *Undertale*, the star appears as hope. When I search for drawings of freedom on Google, I see a lot of birds," she said.

Apsara was referring to her favourite role-playing video game where a child falls into the Underground (a remote area under the surface of the world separated by magic). She battles monsters to return to the surface.

The competition was an excellent nation-building initiative by SK USJ 12 as it "forced" my kid to do research on Merdeka.

To help her understand what Merdeka means, I said Aug 31, 1957, was when the Federation of Malaya gained its independence from the

white people. (Sorry, I used that word as I don't think Apsara knows the concept of Britain or British.)

As I am a proud Sabahan, I asked if she knew what Malaysia Day was.

She didn't have a clue, and she didn't look like she wanted to know because she did not have a drawing competition with Malaysia Day as the theme.

To pique her interest, I related Merdeka and Malaysia Day to public holidays.

"You know why you have no class on Aug 31 and Sept 16? It is because of Merdeka and Malaysia Day," I said. That did it.

"Mummy said there was no school on three Mondays this month," she said.

To help her understand the difference between Merdeka and Malaysia Day and their significance, I looked up the map of Malaysia on Google Maps.

First, I showed her Peninsular Malaysia and explained: "This is the part of Malaysia which celebrates Merdeka as they got their independence from the white people."

Then I showed her Sabah, Sarawak and Singapore and said: "These three states formed Malaysia together with (pointing at the map of Peninsular Malaysia). On Sept 16,

1963, they formed Malaysia. That is why Malaysia Day is important. It is when Malaysia was born."

Perhaps I lost Apsara with that rather "long" explanation as she was busy working on her drawing.

"Are you listening to me?" I asked.

"I'm not interested per se in the subject, but I'm interested in the competition. I like the competition," she said.

"Well, I hope she at least indirectly learnt about history - the birth of two federations - while she was drawing," I thought.

During this history lesson, I might have sounded like I was talking to a kid, which technically I was.

However, sometimes I also talk to adults, especially from Peninsular Malaysia, like that so that they can better understand the concept of the Federation of Malaysia.

For me, it is essential to talk about the history and geography of Malaysia with "clueless orang Malaya" (what many Sabahans and Sarawakians like to call those from Peninsular Malaysia).

History?

Because many think that Malaysia Day is just a public holiday, they don't try to understand why there is such a holiday.

Before 2010, Malaysia Day was

only a public holiday in Sabah and Sarawak. Back then, Peninsular Malaysians could be forgiven for not knowing the day's significance.

But since it is now a national holiday, there should be no excuse for not knowing what it is about.

Geography?

Because many Sabahans and Sarawakians still get this kind of questions from those living in Peninsular Malaysia: "You are from Kuching? When did you arrive in Malaysia?" or "You are from Sandakan? What is your currency?"

Also, some don't know that Sarawak is the largest state in Malaysia - it is almost the size of Peninsular Malaysia - followed by Sabah. There are maps and logos which depict the peninsula as being larger than both Sarawak and Sabah.

Some of us haven't "Merdeka" in our mindset that Malaysia has more than three races - Malay, Chinese and Indian. "*Dan lain lain*" (others) is like an unheard of community.

The Rojak Projek, a social enterprise that focuses on creating positive understanding and awareness by promoting unity, culture and diversity, found that we are a #rojaknation. We have more than 250 ethnicities such as Cheq Wong, Jagoi and Liwogu.

In her journey across Malaysia for the Rojak Projek, co-founder Lim Sheng Feiyan told me that she concluded that Malaysia means all of us together.

She can't imagine life without her Indian, Malay, Punjabi and super rojak friends and family.

"Now I can't imagine life without the Sabahans, Sarawakians and Orang Asli I met," she said.

Today, I'll be celebrating Merdeka at the #AnakAnakMalaysia Walk, a collaboration between property developer Eco World Development Group and Star Media Group.

The theme for this year is #BetterMeBetterMalaysia.

I'll be there to meet and walk with like-minded Malaysians such as Lim as well as Syed Sadiq Albar and Collin Swee, the co-founders of Projek57, a social enterprise committed to building unity and hope among Malaysian youth.

Syed Sadiq believes that unity could come from diversity.

"As different as we all are, we should be able to embrace that diversity and celebrate our similarities," he said in an interview with *The Star*.

Selamat Hari Merdeka! And, as I told Apsara, don't forget that Malaysia Day is equally important or - arguably - more awesome.