

Diversity, the Malaysian special

Dr M seems to think that the best thing for Malaysia is for all its citizens to become Malay'. This writer begs to differ. The best thing about Malaysia is its diverse traditions, cultures, religions and cuisine.

IT was Thaipusam and, as usual, I was in Penang - walking down the streets looking every bit like a kavadi bearer with my bearded face and traditional outfit.

A Chinese man cut across the road and yelled: "Hey!" I stopped and looked. "Happy Thaipusam," he said, grinning as he rode off on his bike.

And at Waterfall Hill temple, as the crowds gathered, there were scores of Red Crescent volunteers helping the weak and tired.

They had smiles on their faces - and headscarves over their hair.

Malay girls and boys also worked as volunteers elsewhere, serving drinks and helping out wherever they could.

There were Chinese lion dances to greet the chariot carrying the presiding deity Lord Muruga, and there were kavadi in the shape of dragons holding his weapon, the Vel.

This is the Malaysia I love to see, a diverse group of people with different cultures, traditions and even religions - but always there for each other.

I would not want that changed for anything, especially not the Malaysia that former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad dreams of. He believes we should all be homogeneous and become Malay.

At least, that's what he told an Indian journalist who interviewed him recently. But would he really be happy with that?

Would a homogeneous Malay nation really work? What of bumiputra benefits - the discounts for housing, special privileges, prevalence in the civil service and access to government contracts?

Will we then have a level playing field, since we would all be Malays? Would Dr Mahathir want that? I have read his *The Malay Dilemma*. I read it even when it was banned, covering it with brown paper so as to not get into trouble.

I don't think he would want a world where real Malays would have to compete directly with the Chinese who identify as Malay. That would be a nightmare for him. And how would he then set one race against another to gain

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Why not?

political brownie points?

We already have some non-Malays who practise the Malay way of life, speak Bahasa Malaysia and are Muslim. But they can only be constitutional Malays, not real Malays.

It's impossible for anyone to actually change their ancestry even if they change their religion, language and way of life. Dr Mahathir, although of Indian descent, identifies exclusively as Malay but that "spoonful" of Indian blood in his lineage is there to stay.

The spoon may have been the size of a ladle for him, and a teaspoon for his great-grandchildren, but it's there nonetheless.

There are also some convert preachers who believe themselves to be Malay, but it's a fallacy. DNA is not something you change by switching to a different language or religion.

It reminds me of the story of when a minister in Indonesia, the country with the world's highest number of Muslims, was asked why an image of the Hindu god Ganesha was on their currency notes. His reply: "We have changed our religion, not our ancestors."

Ancestry is something you can never change. After almost 100 years of being around, Dr Mahathir does not seem to have learnt that.

He also claimed that foreigners in other countries had assimilated and "become" natives of the land.

People like United States vice-president Kamala Harris, he said, have given up on their Indian ancestry and accepted the American way. But he is not exactly right.

I don't know about Harris, but



Always there for each other:

Quennie Teoh (in blue T-shirt) helping to distribute food packets and drinks to devotees participating in the Thaipusam celebration along Jalan Keramat, George Town.
- LIM BENG TATT/
The Star

almost a third of Americans, like Italians and Hispanics, speak their own languages at home.

Anyone going to Certain parts of Los Angeles could possibly go a whole day without hearing a word of English. Most people there speak Spanish as their first language.

But, like the non-Malays in Malaysia, these foreign migrants consider themselves all-American. Many are even against further immigration from their own original countries. Harris, for one, still loves Indian food.

Then there is Rishi Sunak, the British Prime Minister who remains a Hindu. In fact, he was the first British MP to take his oath of office upon the Bhagavad Gita, the Hindu holy book. Fellow MP Alok Sharma followed suit.

Scotland's new First Minister Hussain Yusouf, a Muslim of Pakistani descent, also took his oath in both English and Urdu.

In Canada, MP Rathika Sitsabaisean made her maiden speech in Parliament in Tamil to a standing ovation. The country's parliamentarians had no problems with that.

One does not need to transform into a native to serve the country they call their own.

Take Tan Sri Devaki Krishnan, who passed on last week. She was a grand old lady, a centurion and freedom fighter.

She had seen wars, the fight for the country's freedom and taken on the British. She was the first woman elected councillor, winning the seat in 1952 - 12 years before Dr Mahathir won his Dewan Rakyat seat for the first time.

Devaki was a woman's group leader, a civil defence officer and the longest-serving Malaysian Indian Congress member. She oversaw the treatment of the thousands injured in one of the country's darkest days, May 13, 1969.

She was bom to a postal chief who hailed from Sri Lanka, but she was neither Sri Lankan nor Indian. She was Malaysian. She did not have to call herself Malay. When she died, she was feted as a true Malaysian legend.

Not all who call themselves "natives" bring good to the country. We already have stories of billions being siphoned out of the country and into the bank accounts of some top leaders.

We don't know how true the stories are, but court cases could be coming soon and a lot of unrav-

elling can happen.

And here's another fact for Dr M - there are Tamil and Chinese schools in the United States. The California Tamil Academy, now called International Tamil Academy (ITA), has six branches in California and 45 affiliated schools in 13 other states.

It also runs schools in the United Kingdom and United Arab Emirates. True, they are not government-run schools, but ITA is a non-profit organisation so it's not all that expensive either.

It does not really matter if we speak Tamil, Mandarin, Hokkien or whatever, as long as we honour and uphold Bahasa Malaysia as our national language.

It does not matter if we follow our own traditions and religions as long as we accept that Islam is the religion of the Federation and that the Malays will always be the majority group.

As for me, I will always be following my tradition and religion while embracing that of others. Now that Thaipusam is done and dusted, it's time to gear up for Chinese New Year and yee sang.

It's a Malaysian tradition, not something imported from China. Like I said, that's what makes Malaysia special.