

TUNKU ABDUL RAHMAN: A prince among royals

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THE recent death of R. Kalimuthu, 87, who was the driver for Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al Haj from 1948 to 1990, reminded me of the few occasions I had the privilege of driving our first prime minister after he stepped down.

In 1974, after dropping Tunku off at the Selangor Turf Club, I dashed in to catch a glimpse of the race at what is now the Kuala Lumpur City Centre (KLCC).

I remember some bystanders asking me something I did not understand. Only later did I realise that they were asking for betting tips, as Tunku was known to be good in picking winning horses.

On another occasion, Tunku was feeling hungry in the evening and asked me for a good place for cheek, using a Cantonese word. It sounded like "cheeyoke" and I offered no recommendation. His aide then told me to drive to Campbell Road, now Jalan Dang Wangi, and I realised that what the Tunku meant was chook or porridge.

Another time, I made a mistake when I drove him to the wedding reception of a daughter of the late Tun Dr Ismail in Jalan Tun Ismail. Malay weddings in those days were less sombre affairs. There was always entertainment and it was an enjoyable evening for everyone.

When it was over, I waited for several sultans to leave first as I was aware that their royal highnesses take precedence over a prime minister, serving or retired.

However, suddenly there were people yelling for Tunku's driver and I was told to rush to the main door with the car. Tunku, himself a prince, had a special place in the hearts of the sultans. Their royal highnesses regarded Tunku as senior and felt obliged to see him off before leaving. Instead, while waiting for my car, he was sending off the sultans.

But there was not a word from Tunku while I drove him back to Kenny Hills, which is now renamed Bukit Tunku.

Whenever I was assigned by my tour company to drive Tunku, he gave instructions to me in Malay and I drove silently to the destination. I understand there are times that silence is golden and private space is treasured.

Thirty-eight years have passed but the memories of driving Tunku around have not diminished.

I am not surprised to hear that Kalimuthu's wife and children had also assisted in serving Tunku and his wife faithfully for many years.

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