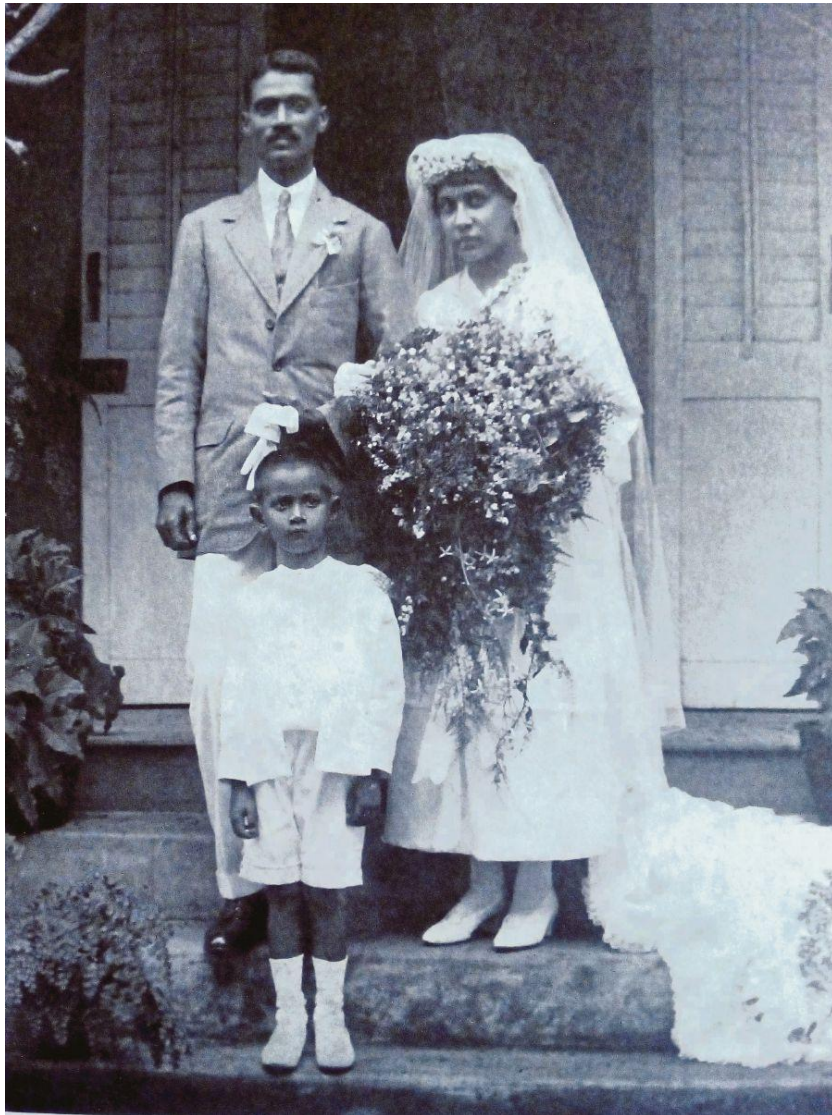


History's different narratives

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By HAZLINA AZIZ



The wedding picture of Dr Anthony Kathigas and Sybil Daly. The petition to include her contributions in Malaysian history textbooks has garnered 2,326 signatures. (FILE PIC)

THE petition to include Sybil Kathigas, the wartime nurse in Malaysian history books, has garnered 2,326 signatures at the time of writing.

Ten days ago, Professor Datuk Dr Teo Kok Seong from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia led the call to review history textbooks to include Sybil.

The National Professors Council's head of the history, heritage and socio-culture cluster said it was high time for the change — also as part of the five-yearly schedule for textbook updates.

In response, Deputy Education Minister Datuk P. Kamalanathan said the Education Ministry, while open to ideas and suggestions, needed a formal proposal. He said changes in history textbooks must not only follow a process, but also involve certain criteria to ensure justification and relevancy.

The petition administrator, registered on change.org, wrote: "Malaysians have a very poor sense of history. In recent decades, our education system and schools placed little emphasis on the subject. What passed off as history was knowing which political party and politicians featured prominently in Malaysia's recent past."

Our history textbooks have been criticised in the past for being biased and not sufficiently inclusive or accurate.

Generally, there are two types of bias in history textbooks: bias of exclusion (whether an event is discussed in the first place as in the case of Sybil) and bias of description (on how the event is portrayed to students).

For instance, one common criticism that is often brought up on textbook content is the downplaying of the role of Yap Ah Loy in the history of Kuala Lumpur.

The late Tan Sri Adenan Satem had, in the past, called for a review of the country's history textbooks to include the contributions of east Malaysians, specifically Sabahans and Sarawakians.

Revising history textbooks can be a never-ending story but that does not mean it should not be done.

The essential process of reconsideration and re-evaluation takes place in all disciplines. Imagine a diagnosis from a doctor who is not updated with the latest in medical research.

Essentially, history is a collection of memories — and that collection depends on the memories chosen. It is anything but an agreeable set of narratives.

It cannot be a uniform collective story because that is similar to saying everyone remembers events the same way.

Historians studying the same topic will analyse and draw different interpretations into meaningful conclusions; sometimes radically so, depending on the sources they draw from.

Malaysia is not the only country having a battle over history textbooks. Examples are plenty.

In Texas, where the state board of education approves books for use in classroom, there were disagreements on the interpretation of events like slavery.

The conservatives in Japan wanted the wartime brutalities of Japanese soldiers downplayed in the classroom.

South Korea had a very similar row over the government's plan to write a single history textbook when the authors of the textbook did not want to change their point of view.

Debate over what and how history is taught in our schools is hardly new. Your child won't learn the same history in secondary school that you did when you were a teenager.

Certain events that you were tested on when you were in school will probably be entirely omitted; new details, observations and commentaries will be added to their textbooks with the benefit of more time and perspective.

Memorising a litany of names, dates and facts is the teaching approach of the past. Previously, history was tested only through multiple choice questions.

The subject changes over time; it now requires attention to context and reassesses traditional narratives with coursework at PT3 level, and is a compulsory subject to pass for Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM).

The SPM Sejarah subject today consists of three papers. Paper 1 features 40 multiple choice questions and Paper 2 has structured questions with two sections.

For Paper 3, students are given a task a month before together with the general theme to be tested. The actual question, announced on the examination day, carries 20 per cent.

There are also questions about what the study of history is for. Is the subject a tool to establish loyalty to the nation or is it to produce critical citizens who can draw lessons from past events?

Does learning history mean engaging with aspects of the past that are troubling, as well as those that are heroic?

The argument is that if we want students to understand what happened in the past, they need an unvarnished picture and the skills to understand and interpret that picture analytically.

However, teachers — not academic researchers, think tanks or politicians — are the ones who decide daily how to explore topics in their history classrooms. Ultimately, it is up to the teachers to teach the subject.

Some said the challenge is to teach students the critical-thinking skills that allow them to recognise bias in their textbooks and to appreciate the troubling paradoxes of Malaysia's past.

How should Malaysians remember Merdeka? How should they remember the formation of Malaysia?

These are perennial issues that will continue to inspire debate.

The writer left her teaching career more than 20 years ago to take on different challenges beyond the conventional classroom. As NST's education editor, the world is now her classroom

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