

A Merdeka of the mind
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Our education is too Western-centric, aping Western universities and showing ignorance of Asian and African contributions to knowledge.

AS we celebrate 55 years of political independence, we may note the blessings of peace and prosperity in our beloved land. But we also need to reflect on some unfulfilled dimensions of independence.

If independence is autonomy or freedom from the control of another nation, then we Malaysians are hardly free.

The basic assumptions of our political, economic and educational systems are dictated by Western, especially Anglo-American, hegemony. Politically we are free but enslavement of the mind has hardly ceased.

Syed Hussein Alatas calls it “the captive mind”. For Ward Churchill, modern intellectual discourse and higher education are “White Studies”.

Hundreds of years ago, the coloniser seized not only land but minds, monopolising information sources and undermining indigenous know-ledge.

For Frantz Fanon, the colonised was “elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country’s cultural standards”.

Ngugi wa Thiong says “it is the final triumph of a system of domination, when the dominated start singing its virtues”.

So 55 years after independence, our public figures are still enamoured with the colonial tune. Their intellectual discourses have three tendencies.

First, the Western worldview and its assumptions are blindly aped. Second, we are ignorant of Asian and African roots of knowledge and Eastern contributions to civilisation. Third, there is hardly any critique of Western theories in the light of our own realities.

Take Western-centrism in our educational institutions. Yusef Progler finds that in whatever field of study, a course in most Asian and African universities follows a similar path.

“It will first identify the great white European or American men of each discipline and then drill their theories and practices as if these were universal”, while ignoring knowledge from other civilisations.

Government recognition of foreign degrees is skewed in favour of Anglo-American awards. Eminent citadels of learning in Asia and Africa are largely ignored.

The favoured destination for JPA-sponsored postgraduate scholars is Europe or the United States. The external examiners and visiting professors are mostly from Britain, the US or Australia. Asian scholars are generally excluded from such honours or offered lesser terms.

Intellectual grovelling before Western experts remains as deeply ingrained as during the British Raj. A few years ago, Cherie Blair was invited to lead the arguments in a case before our courts even when scores of eminent local lawyers were available.

In any prestigious lecture series, the guest of honour is invariably a Westerner, sometimes of dubious credentials. For example, Tony Blair was invited by a local NGO to deliver a lecture.

But when Mugabe and Bashar were scheduled to come, concern was expressed, and rightly so. The crimes of Western leaders may be ignored, but we jump up to take a principled stand against Asian and African miscreants.

Our legal system remains British-oriented. In the English fashion of Austinian positivism, the concept of law is tied to the commands of the political sovereign

even though most Asians and Africans regard religion and custom as part of the seamless web of the law.

The Civil Law Act continues its worship of outdated British precedents even though we have greater affinity with many other constitutional systems like India's.

The Legal Profession Act continues to permit British graduates to be called to the Malaysian Bar without undergoing a bridging course. A key component of the course should be a study of the Malaysian Constitution.

In our law faculties, legal education is as much a colonial construct as during the Raj. The course structure and content, the book list and the icons are mostly Western.

A typical course on jurisprudence in Malaysia often begins with Plato, Aristotle, Locke, Bentham, Pound, Weber, Ehrlich, Durkheim, Marx, etc.

The Mahabharata, the Arthashastra, the Book of Mencius, the Analects of Confucius and the treatises of Ghazali, Ibn Rushd, Jose Rizal, Benoy Kumar Sarkar, Yanagita Kunio and Naquib al-Attas are not included.

Chinese, Indian and Persian universities predated European ones and provided paradigms for early Western education. Yet our universities ignore centuries of enlightenment in China, India, Japan, Persia and West Asia.

It is as if all things good and wholesome originated with Western civilisation and the East was, and is, an intellectual desert. The truth is otherwise.

In science, Galileo, Newton and Einstein illuminated the firmament but not much is known about Al-hazen and Nasir al-Din al-Tusi. Western chemistry was preceded by Eastern alchemy, algebra had African roots.

The philosophy of Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Sartre and Goethe can be matched by Ghazali, Ibn Rushd, Mulla Sadra, Shenhui, al-Mutanabbi and Kalidasa. Durkheim's and Weber's sociology must compete with Ibn Khaldun's.

Freudian psychology had its corrective in Buddhist wisdom. The Cartesian medical model has its Eastern counterpart in ayurvedic, unani and herbal methods.

Very few know that Arab Muslims were central to the making of medieval Europe.

A slavish mimicking of Western norms of government, law and economics prevents us from tackling our own problems like poverty and unsustainable development.

Our attitude leaves us vulnerable to many predatory policies of Western-dominated institutions and processes. Transnational corporations dominate our economies.

Many Asian and African nations choke under the debt stranglehold. The West can bring down our economies with currency speculation, hedge funds, piracy of indigenous resources and trade boycotts as new forms of tyranny.

Yet we are too scared or ashamed to express our own views. Basing our life on other nations' opinions is slavery.

As Aug 31 approaches, we must resolve to free our minds from Western intellectual hegemony. A Merdeka of the mind will put us on the path to that.

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