

Edunation: Appreciating our nation's history

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A visit to our country's many museums is a must for secondary-school students for they cannot fully appreciate Malaysian history just by reading textbooks or learning it within the confines of a classroom. History comes alive through the artefacts, manuscripts and many exhibits displayed in the museums. Indeed, a visit to the museum should be made a requirement for students since the national curriculum emphasises history, especially now that it is compulsory to pass the subject in the SPM examination.

Muzium Negara specifically must be on the list of places to visit.

Recently, a group of us decided to visit Muzium Negara. The composition of our party ranged from school-goers to parents and grandparents, who, ironically, through their years of Malayan/Malaysian education, had received different glimpses of history in the classrooms. We actually compared notes on what we had and had not learnt in our schools as we looked at the exhibits in the museum.

It is highly recommended that groups, especially of students, opt for a guided tour of Muzium Negara to get a better understanding of the exhibits and the four chronologically arranged galleries. To our delight, our group of 12 was hosted by three enthusiastic and knowledgeable museum guides who were French nationals. Listening to Marie, Katia and Daniela tell us our own history was somewhat refreshing, making us appreciate our country's past even more.

Although the museum's exhibits offered us a glimpse of historical events in chronological order, we felt that they needed to be updated. For example, the narrative could correspond with the school textbooks and vice versa, and perhaps it could be improved by the use of augmented reality to appeal to a tech-accustomed audience. The museum's galleries covered the prehistoric days of Sundaland and the effects of the meltdown of the Ice Age, then eventually the civilisation of Hindu Buddhism and the Malay Kingdom. Then followed the Nusantara trading empire and the glory days of Melaka, which led to the colonial occupation and finally the road to nationhood.

However, a critical element was missing — the people of the country. How did we all get here and what were the contributions of the people towards the nation? Perhaps, Muzium Negara could have a section on nation-building, which could correspond with the school history curriculum, so students could get a walking tour of their classroom lessons.

If our history education in schools is meant to promote patriotism and national cohesion, the content should be more inclusive and pay tribute to every race, religion, tribe and culture. More needs to be done to our history lessons to encourage young people to appreciate our past and develop the needed critical thinking skills and curiosity.

This discussion on history revisits a forum organised by the Association of Voices of Peace, Conscience and Reason and Universiti Malaya in October 2016, entitled History of Nation Building. It was an assembly of the country's greatest minds of history, including the late Tan Sri Professor Khoo Kay Kim. It was decided that indeed we needed to review our history curriculum to make it more inclusive for all races and recognise the contribution of each to nation building, including that of the Sabahans and Sarawakians. Our history should reflect our plural society to amalgamate a sense of pride, belonging and loyalty to the country.

Three years have passed since that discussion took place and nothing much has come of it. The history curriculum in schools is still the same. Perhaps, it should not be called history but national studies.

We need to improve the way we teach history to make it more interesting for the younger generation, perhaps with visual aids, technology, role play and discussions as suggested by history academicians at the forum. But first, we have to ensure the teachers are well versed in the subject and take an integrated approach to imparting their knowledge.

The students must learn history from different perspectives and not rely on textbooks alone just to finish the syllabus and do well in the exams. Textbook narratives are also opinionated, whereby the interpretation and inferences are already made for the students to accept. How then will they develop critical thinking skills?

For example, the recent discussion of Chin Peng's ashes is one of national interest and can be looked at from many perspectives.

The writing is on the wall that if we do not correct the current method of teaching and learning history, we are headed for more confusion, segregation and animosity among our young, much to the detriment of the country's economic and social prosperity.

Unfortunately, the ball is in the politicians' court.

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