

# That indescribable feeling

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**KUALA LUMPUR:** When the British colonialists departed, no tears were shed for them. Neither was there any acrimony. In fact, both Malaysians and British officials were in high spirits.

Malaysians gathered at the Selangor Club field on Aug 31, 1957 were determined not to see the British as enemies.

Among those who had such thoughts on that day was a young woman in a sari, the wife of one of the nation's founding fathers.

Toh Puan Uma Sambanthan recalls that she felt the British had to go and that Malaysians must be left to decide their future.

"We were determined not to harbour any animosity towards them and we certainly did not see them as our enemies, but it was time for us to be masters of our own country.

"For us, this was for the betterment of the nation after nearly 200 years of colonisation. That stage had passed and we now had the liberty to lead our country," she said.

But Uma, who was only 27 when the *Negaraku* was played for the first time on that field, was no ordinary young woman.

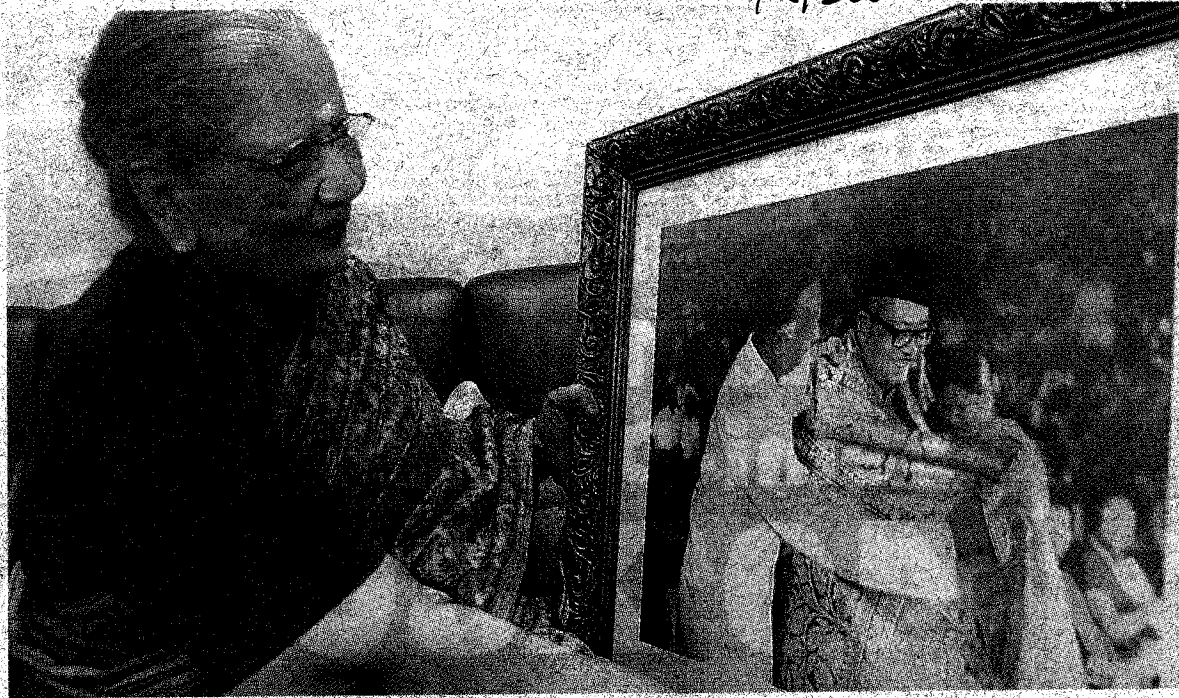
She was the wife of MIC president Tun V.T. Sambanthan, the new Labour Minister.

Uma said: "I could feel the hair on my arms standing as I heard the national anthem for the first time.

"It was so symbolic... a sign that we were free of the colonial regime, free to think for ourselves, free to lead our own country."

It was truly a moment of great intensity. Uma and Sambanthan, who stood behind the country's first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman, did not speak much as they were overcome with emotion as the Union Jack was lowered and the Federation of Malaya flag raised.

The feeling of being present at the historical event on the eve of the



Uma with a picture of Sambanthan honouring Tunku with a shawl woven from golden threads during the MIC's 20th anniversary celebrations. — Picture by Azahan Rosli

country's Independence Day was indescribable, said Uma.

"Many years have passed, but that feeling still lingers and I think it will live in me forever," she said.

She still remembers what she wore on that momentous occasion — an off-white silk sari with a red border, a personal favourite as it had been an engagement gift from Sambanthan.

He looked dapper in the white uniform that was worn by all the ministers that night.

But although everyone gathered at the field (now Dataran Merdeka) was in a celebratory mood, an undercurrent of uneasiness was present.

Uma admitted that she felt a little apprehensive as the country was still under a state of emergency which had been declared in 1948 because of the communist threat.

"When five minutes had lapsed af-

ter the clock struck midnight and nothing happened, I remember wondering if something had gone wrong.

"Then I realised that the Tunku had been delayed as the crowds thronged around him.

"When the whole ceremony concluded without any hitch, I actually heaved a sigh of relief," she said, when met at her house in Petaling Jaya.

Earlier in the evening, Uma and Sambanthan had walked down to the Lake Gardens from their house nearby to watch the cultural performances which were held in conjunction with the event.

"We talked to many people that night and so many expressed their joy at gaining independence," she said with a smile.

It was a thrilling and meaningful night for many. Uma said she was unable to sleep much that night with all

the excitement and happiness.

She was not alone. As dawn broke, Uma and Sambanthan went over to Tunku's house expecting to find him well-rested after the late night proceedings.

"When my late husband asked if he had slept well, Tunku replied, 'Sambanthan, how could I sleep? There was such a great crowd of people last night. I was praying the whole night'."

Her respect for Tunku is apparent as she speaks about him in glowing terms. He was, she said, a man who lived by example.

Uma said he conceptualised the building of the Merdeka Stadium as he wanted a place where people could come together for sporting events.

"He believed that those who could play together would not think ill of

**GOLDEN MERDEKA Memories**

MERDEKA. The very word evokes emotion. How did those who took part in the epochal gatherings at the Selangor Club padang and Merdeka Stadium on Aug 31, 1957 feel? What memories do they have of the nation's founding fathers?

If you had participated in the Merdeka celebrations or know of someone who did, please drop us a line.

If you have any Merdeka memorabilia, we would like to know too. We may want to interview you.

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each other.

"He laid the foundation for a truly Malaysian identity," she said.

And as the nation prepares to celebrate its 49th birthday, Uma, who is now 77 years old, hopes that a truly Malaysian identity will be achieved, putting an end to polarisation of races among the younger generation.

"If we can get over the problem of polarisation, then we have made it.

"Our greatest treasure is our young people and we older people have to be there for them," said Uma, who has herself contributed much to the nation.

And of her future aspirations?

"Independence for me was a joyous and meaningful thing. Now, it is my challenge to make it meaningful for this generation and their children's generation," she said.