

THE COMMUNIST

1952 - Kampung railway burnt by terrorists



1950's
Emergency
Period -
inspection by
the British
army



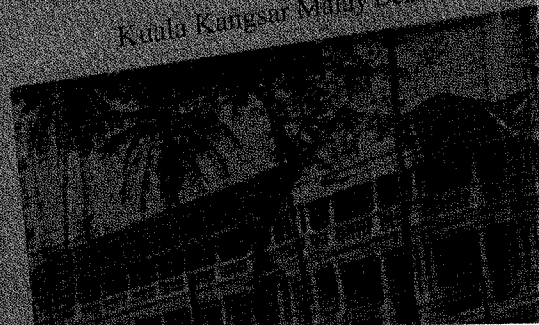
1952 - Sir Gerald Temple in a "kampung baru" settlement



The people



Kuala Kangsar Malay School



merdeka special

By Ehsanuddin Rais

I REMEMBER MERDEKA

THE SMALL-TOWN VERSION OF THE BIG EVENT THROUGH THE EYES OF A CHILD

PLACE: Kuala Klawang, Jelebu, Negri Sembilan
TIME: Circa 1956/1957
SCENE: Padang Sekolah Umum Kuala Klawang

ACT 1

I remember that Tuan OCPD, Tuan DO and the pegawai mata-mata of my district were all Mat Salleh. My family lived barely 50 metres from the rumah pasung. Tuan OCPD and Tuan DO lived on top of the hill overlooking Kuala Klawang Valley. Just below their residence was an army camp for the Gurkhas. I had no idea why they were there.

Kuala Klawang town was fenced in by barbed wire, with three Gurkhas guarding the gates. The main gate was less than a mile from the town centre, on the main road that opens up Jelebu to Seremban. The other gate was on a road leading to Titi, a Chinese New Village. The third gate led to the surrounding Malay kampungs. My late mother, a school teacher, was given government quarters within the barbed-wire township. The school compound and our house were situated at the edge of the eight-foot fence. Our jamban angkat was within touching distance of it. We children were warned not to sneak out through the fence. From 6pm to 6am, we had to stay indoors or the Gurkhas would shoot us for breaking the curfew. I honestly didn't know why things were like that.

One late afternoon, while I was playing in the padang sekolah, I saw a Mat Salleh mem walking around looking for her kitten. She was blonde, quite unlike us dark native boys in our seluar pendek. Behind the mem was her amah — a young Chinese woman. It was the amah who spoke to us, explaining in Malay that her mem had lost her kucing. Any of us who found her kucing would be given some upah. We were very excited about the upah.

Immediately after they left, we started running around in the belukar trying to find the kucing. That was my first attempt at getting employment from a Mat Salleh. Was it the money? Or was it because she was blonde and beautiful that made us ever willing to bekerja for her? I have no idea why I behaved that way then.

ACT 2

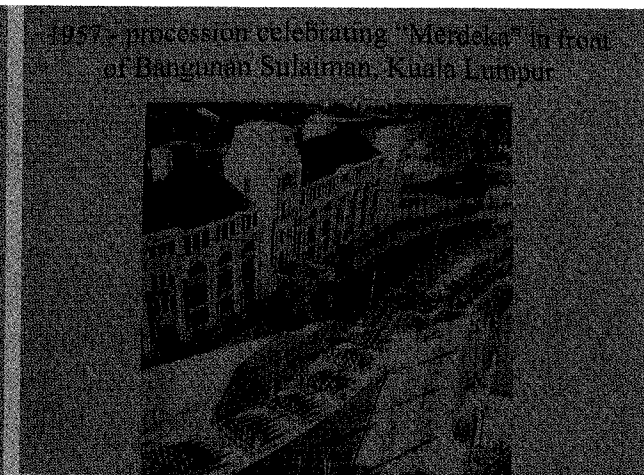
One midday, I heard a creaking sound followed by a loud bang. It was an accident. An armoured car driven by a Gurkha had knocked down an Indian boy just in front of the padang. The boy was on his bicycle. There was no ambulance and the boy was dead before anyone arrived. The police van came by later to pick up the body. That afternoon, my brother and I went to visit the scene of the accident. There was nothing there apart from a small scratch on the road maybe made by the bi-

Women home guards



→ Scenes to be used in Merdeka! Merdeka! Merdeka! the new RTM mini-series (see page 51)

1957 – procession celebrating 'Merdeka' in front of Bangunan Sulaiman, Kuala Lumpur



cycle's tyre when it was dragged by the huge armoured car.

All the children in my neighbourhood had their version of the accident. There was no inquiry, no police report. The children knew all the Gurkhas in our town worked for Tuan OCPD and Tuan DO. To us, whoever worked for Tuan Mat Salleh had to be a small tuan himself. It was no surprise then when we were told that the driver of the armoured car was seen playing cricket in the town's padang the same afternoon. The next day, a friend told me the Indian boy was cremated and his mother cried all day. I never fully understood why Jelevu needed that huge armoured car.

ACT 3

Sometime in 1957, I was registered as a murid in Sekolah Umum Kuala Klawang. My mother bought me a black seluar pendek and a white baju. I also had a new pair of kasut getah and a pair of white socks. I was so proud of my papan batu. Then I heard all the Tuans in our town would balik negeri very soon. My father, who was drafted into the army, told me that we would soon be MERDEHKA. My dad proudly came out with a pantun:

poot poot bunyi motokar

tok onn cabut

umno merdehka

I have no idea why merdeka was spelt merdehka. And I thought Umno was the name of a car.

Sometime in August 1957, while playing in the padang sekolah, I saw several Indian workers from the PWD arranging various little flags and tying them to bamboo poles. Because of them, the children started a new game – identifying the state flags. I never realised we had so many flags and so many negeri. My notion of my being was shattered; I thought there were only Jelevu and Negri Sembilan. Never did I realise there were so many of us.

The school holidays came. My brother was lucky that he was invited by my uncle to Kuala Lumpur; I was stuck in Jelevu still not knowing that merdeka was coming despite all the flags and the buntings flying in every corner of our small town. Pekan Kuala Klawang was given a new coat of white paint. The town padang was

decorated with lots of colourful lights. A podium was constructed in the middle of the town's padang with the word 'merdeka' on top of it.

Two days before August 31, 1957, I took an early night walk around town. On that particular evening, I thought Kuala Klawang had to be the most beautiful town on planet Earth – a city of lights, glittering and glowing everywhere. All the kedai Cina were lit up. The Chinese Tuah Pehk Kong, the Hindu temple, the church, the pejabat DO – all had been transformed. Even our small wooden post-office was covered in neon bulbs.

WAS IT THE MONEY? OR WAS IT BECAUSE SHE WAS BLONDE AND BEAUTIFUL THAT MADE US EVER WILLING TO BEKERJA FOR HER?

My most memorable image was of four fluorescent lights transformed into the letter 'M'. They were seen everywhere. I thought it so clever and marvellous. How could these people think of such great ideas, deconstructing those long thin fluorescent lights into the word 'Merdeka'? And what about those small colourful light bulbs that went on and off and – suddenly the word 'Merdeka' appeared. I felt so small and stupid under the spell of such great works of art.

August 31 morning came. It was a fiesta. I cannot remember who or what was said on the podium; all I can remember is the Undang of Jelevu gracing the occasion in his full adat dress. Several Mat Salleh and their mems sat next to our Datuk Undang. Some Chinese towkays came dressed up all in white, including their topis. They looked so Mat Salleh, particularly the ones who were accompanied by several beautiful Chinese ladies in their finest cheongsam. Several Indians in dhotis and sarees were seen sitting in the guest tent. And loads of orang kampung from all over Jelevu came to the padang in their baju Hari Raya.

That afternoon, there was a 'wayang free' at Ruby Theatre, the only panggung wayang in my town. I had no clue what the film was all about. Anyway, who really cared about the nar-

rative, the director or who the actors were. It was all in English and I'd only been in school for a few months. What was vital to us was tengok-wayang-koboi-free on Merdeka Day.

The fiesta continued into the evening with an open-air stage show in the town padang for the orang ramai. Chinese, Indian and Malay dances were performed by orang Jelevu. For the Tuan-tuan Mat Salleh and not the orang ramai, there was 'something' held at the local club behind the government office.

A week after Merdeka, my brother came back from Kuala Lumpur. He had even more wonderful, amazing cerita about Merdeka. According to him, thousands and thousands of things happened in Kuala Lumpur on Merdeka Day. But most importantly, he saw a silap mata show being performed for the public on Merdeka Day somewhere in the streets of Kuala Lumpur. I love silap mata. I was so disappointed there was no silap mata show on my Merdeka Day.

EPILOGUE

August 2005, 48 years later, those three fortified gates and the Gurkhas have gone forever from Jelevu. The road that was once in front of the camp has been renamed Jalan Gurkha to remind orang Jelevu their town was once a military outpost. Tuan DO has now become Tuan Pegawai Daerah. The rumah pasung is now known as balai polis. The PWD has been changed to JKR, yet I still have no clue what Merdeka was all about.

Was it about the fluorescent lights I saw that enchanted evening? Or was it about the death of that Indian boy? Or was it about that poor, beautiful, blonde memsahib who lost her kucing? Or maybe Merdeka was about wayang free for school children.

But I think my brother was dead right: Merdeka was really a silap mata performed by a great magician, like the slow transformation of the slogan 'Hidup Melayu' to 'merdehka' and finally to 'merdeka'. It was a magic performance by United Malays National Organisation who magically appropriated 'merdeka', the slogan and political agenda of Parti Kebangsaan Melayu Muda. In 2005, I know why there was no need to have a silap mata show on Merdeka Day 1957 in Jelevu. The real silap mata was performed in Kuala Lumpur. ■