

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER AT THE
OPENING OF THE INTERNATIONAL CON-
FERENCE ON MALAY CULTURE AT DEWAN
BAHASA DAN PUSTAKA, KUALA LUMPUR, ON
21ST JANUARY, 1972

Mr Chairman, Distinguished Delegates, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me real pleasure to declare open this Conference this morning.

I would like, first of all, to welcome distinguished delegates from various parts of the world who are here to attend this first International Conference on Malay Culture.

I would like to place on record the sincere appreciation of my Government and the people of Malaysia to UNESCO for having chosen our capital city, Kuala Lumpur, to be the venue of this historic Conference.

Mr Chairman and Distinguished Delegates,

Only last August, barely five months ago, we held our first National Cultural Congress with the main aim of examining the fundamental basis and formulating guidelines for the creation of a Malaysian national culture. I had said, on that occasion, that the form and character of a nation's culture depended upon what the society had inherited from the past, and in the process, what it had assimilated and created to be passed down to the coming generations. The creation of a national culture therefore, is a continuing process of acceptance and rejection, subject to the test of time, and it can survive only so long as this process of transmission of its accumulated knowledge from our generation to the next continues without interruption.

However, in this relatively young nation of ours, with a multi-racial character, we feel we should be relentless in our efforts to achieve national unity and establishing a national identity. In as much as we have adopted a national language—Bahasa Malaysia—

and a national ideology—Rukunegara—as the incontrovertible unifying factor, the evolution of a national culture will be an unceasing preoccupation for the whole nation in the years ahead.

It gives me great pleasure, therefore, to be associated with the Malay Culture Project to be launched by this Conference for I sincerely believe that it bears direct relevance to our national objective.

Mr Chairman and Distinguished Delegates,

Culture or civilization as defined by Tylor is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities of man as members of society.

We in this region are very fortunate to have inherited an indigenous culture of high social, moral and artistic values. In the past, and even during our colonial past, these cultural values had ensured the calm and stable society. With the attainment of Independence, and the impact of socio-political and socio-economic changes brought about in its wake, we experience a deeper sense of cultural awareness as a manifestation of national independence and sovereignty.

Mr Chairman, Distinguished Delegates,

It is openly admitted by modern writing that the nature of South-East Asian history has been particularly obscured because many writers have interested themselves primarily in external stimuli to the detriment of the study of indigenous institutions. In writing the history of the region, foreigners namely Europeans and other Asians are elevated beyond their position as principal actors on a common stage. A not-so-renowned writer on South East Asian affairs even went to the extreme of saying that the Malays have no history but piracy.

From this perspective, the indigenous people of this region have been reduced to passive receptors too weak to do more than reflect the brilliance of other civilizations. With regard to Malay Culture in particular, the general impression given is that this is nothing more than an extension of the rich Hindu and Buddhist cultures from the Indian sub-continent, and later subjected to the influence of Islam brought about by Arab traders. The fact is that the

"Malay" settlers were already here living in organised societies long before the advent of the early Indian immigrants to this region.

We can only presume that these early Proto-Malays had evolved a culture of their own, with characteristic strength and resilience to assimilate the influences of the immigrant culture.

Mr Chairman and Distinguished Delegates,

It is in this context that my Government welcomes the efforts by UNESCO to make a comprehensive study of Malay culture as an International effort. The importance and significance of this study has direct relevance not only to us in Malaysia but also to other South-East Asian nations. At regional level, I am confident that the project will further strengthen the existing cultural links between us. It will inject the cultural dimension into regional co-operation and development. It will infuse a greater consciousness of a common cultural heritage and promote participation on a regional basis.

In fact, the Bangkok Declaration establishing ASEAN in 1966 includes provision for regional co-operation in cultural activities. The Malay culture project is, therefore, beneficial to us as it would help eradicate the divisive factors in the region brought about by Western colonialism. Although it is the primary responsibility of the people of this region, which is ourselves, to undertake this, we nonetheless welcome the participation of experts and learned dignitaries from outside the region in this exciting and noteworthy venture.

Mr Chairman,

It is without doubt that the international study-project emanating from this Conference is made with full cognizance of the importance of Malay Culture. The clearly stated objectives are to examine the role of classical and contemporary Malay Culture in the development of civilization in South-East Asia and what is now Malagasy; to promote a deeper understanding of this culture both within and outside the region; and to encourage its development through co-operation amongst scholars, research institutions and other interested individuals and organisations.

We, on our part, eagerly look forward to see the result of this project for as I have indicated it will have far reaching implications beyond our time. Its immediate effect may well be a new orientation of school and university syllabi not only in countries of this region but also in Asian Studies Centres all over the world. Last, but not least, it may exert eminent influence in formulating the cultural policy by some countries which will be an important contribution towards international understanding and in attaining universality.

Mr Chairman and Distinguished Delegates,

I hope it will be possible through this collective international effort to conceptualise Malay culture. For long, it has been too loosely defined and thereby poorly understood even by our people in this region. We know that at one time the boundaries of Malay cultural influence extended far beyond the South-East Asian region to the present Malagasy Republic. Without being atavistic, I may also point out that Malay was the lingua-franca of trade and commerce from Persia to the Philippines. In fact, according to the Dutch Historian, Francis Valentyne, even as late as 1700, the criterion of an educated man was his knowledge and fluency in the Malay language.

The study-project, which I believe will be undertaken jointly by experts from within and from outside the region, will bring forth new knowledge and information elevating Malay culture to its rightful status among other cultures of the world. As experts in various fields, distinguished delegates participating in this Conference will be breaking new grounds and establishing new landmarks in the history of civilization. Yours is a heavy burden of responsibility as you carry the hopes and aspirations of 200 million people of this region.

On that note, I am happy to declare the Conference open and I wish you all success in your deliberations.