

**SPEECH BY THE HON TUN DR MAHTHIR BIN MOHAMAD AT THE STAFA
FORUM
AT ALEXANDRIA, EGYPT ON TUESDAY, 7 SEPTEMBER 2004**

“Cultural Integration”

When cultures meet, three things can happen. Firstly one culture may completely dominate so that the other culture or cultures would wither away and disappear. Secondly the cultures may absorb each other so that there would be a new culture which is a mixture of the different cultures. And thirdly the cultures can coexist sometimes harmoniously and sometimes in conflict. Of course this is a generalisation and there is no clear-cut separation between the three. Elements of one or the other or both may be found in any of the three categories.

2. Today people are more mobile and borders are crossed easily. Single ethnic countries are more difficult to sustain. More and more countries are becoming multi-ethnic as people migrate in all directions to seek a better life. In fact this trend will become more intensified in the future so that there will be substantial percentages of the population of any country which are of different ethnic origins from the native inhabitants and would belong to different cultures.

3. Additionally the world is getting smaller figuratively speaking. Jet travel and instant telephonic and wireless communication have forced countries and peoples and their cultures to come in close contact with each other. Unless there is greater understanding and tolerance of the numerous differences between people, differences in colour, religion, language and culture, conflicts are bound to occur. Such conflicts may lead to civil war even.

4. Because of all these possibilities for conflict it is important to try and understand what happens when cultures come in contact and to work out how to deal with the different results.

5. In the past when culturally different people meet due to migration or conquest there was usually no room for cultural coexistence. The usual thing to happen was for the culture of the majority or the dominant to prevail. The minorities simply adopt or are forced to adopt the culture of the dominant and to discard their own.

6. Thus in Muslim Spain, although the Jews and the Christian Spaniards retained their religions, they all adopted the Arab / Muslim culture. They spoke and wrote Arabic, adopted Muslim names, enjoyed Arab poetry and music and built Arab-styled dwellings and buildings. Some did convert to Islam as well.

7. The Anglo-Saxons who colonised North America by practically exterminating the indigenous Red Indians became culturally dominant. Later immigrants had to adopt the Anglo-Saxon culture. In South America, except in Brazil, the Spanish culture prevailed so that not only did everyone speak Spanish but conversion to Catholicism was universal. But the cultures of North and South America did not remain static forever. They evolved into distinct cultures which did not follow exactly the same lines as in the European motherland. Still they remained identifiable with the original cultures. The old

indigenous cultures may persist in vestigial forms. Thus religious practices differ especially in South America where the old religions of the Amerindians get mixed up with Christianity. In North America the indigenous cultures of the Red Indians disappeared but those of the blacks intrude into the Anglo Saxon culture, giving it a distinct flavour.

8. When the ethnic groups are equally strong either numerically or because of some aspect of power and wealth, there can be assimilation of the different cultures into one culture with some elements of the original cultures. Thus the spread of Islam has resulted in many hybrid cultures in many countries of the Muslim world. The languages incorporate many Arabic words and expressions. Frequently the Arabic script is used. The value systems too reflect the influence of the Arab / Muslims. But otherwise the local culture and values are maintained along with the languages.

9. In some countries the cultures of the different countries of origin are effectively sustained, quite often deliberately. Conflicts are more frequent when this happens. Even chronic civil wars can plague such countries. But if the degree of tolerance is high the different cultures can exist side by side.

10. Here, with your permission I would like to relate Malaysia's experience. Malaysia is a multi-racial country made up of the indigenous Malays together with the tribes of Sarawak and Sabah; the Chinese descendants of immigrants who started coming to the Malay states more than 600 years ago, before European colonisation, and the Indians brought in as indentured labourers by the British to work in the rubber estates. At one stage the Chinese actually outnumbered the indigenous Malays. Had it not been for the recession in the 1920's when many immigrants went back to their countries, Malaysia would be a Chinese dominated country like Singapore.

11. During the colonial period the British kept the different races physically apart. This prevented racial conflicts but it also preserved the cultures of the different racial groups almost intact.

12. At the time of the struggles for independence the majority of the people of Malaysia were Malays. Since British rule in the Malay States was through treaties with the Malay Sultans, independent Malaysia should revert to Malay rule. The Chinese and Indians would legally have no status in Malaysia.

13. But the Malays decided that they should share political power with the Chinese and Indians and the other non-Malay indigenous people. Malaysia's approach to race relations, like everything else, is unconventional.

14. The Malays harboured hopes that they would assimilate to other races. But the other races were too big and too strong for this to happen.

15. In addition the Chinese were economically powerful, and this enabled them to balance the political power of the Malays. The differences in the religions of the three different races also militate against assimilation.

16. Attempts to make Malay culture the official culture were not very successful. In the end it was accepted that the different races should retain their cultures but the official national culture should largely be that of the Malays.

17. Thus the official language is Malay but the other languages can be preserved and used as teaching media in schools. This contrasts significantly with some countries which do not allow the languages of the minority communities to be used at all. Islam is the official religion of the country but other religions may be professed without any hindrance. The cultures of the different races are preserved but some elements of the non-Malay cultures have become a part of the national culture.

18. And the Malay culture has in turn become a part of the cultures of the non-Malays.

19. The preservation of the cultures of the three races is such that they remain distinct enough to be recognisable and identifiable yet they are different from the cultures of their countries of origin. Thus the Chinese spoken in Malaysia is sprinkled lavishly with Malay words while the Malays use Chinese words for certain things. It is the same with the Indians.

20. The difference in the cultures of the different races are such that Malaysia claims to be truly Asia because you can see the Malay / Indonesian, the Chinese and the Indian cultures in Malaysia, including their ethnic cuisines.

21. What enables the different cultures in Malaysia to be sustained and to co-exist is the spirit of tolerance and pragmatism displayed by everyone. Malaysians know that any attempt to impose any one culture would cause resentment, non-cooperation and perhaps racial confrontation. The country would become unstable and be unable to grow.

22. We believe in Malaysia that it is better to have a slice of a growing cake than the whole of a shrinking cake. The tolerance for each other's culture has resulted in Malaysia becoming peaceful and stable. As a result economic growth has been rapid and the share of the economic wealth of each community has grown far bigger than the whole of the original economic wealth of the country.

23. Malaysia's formula for cultural integration follows no hard and fast rule. It is the result of responding to given situations. Had Malaysians been dogmatic and unwilling to make adjustments, the integration of cultures would not be possible.

24. While Malaysia's formula cannot be applied to all countries with a multi-racial population, there is no doubt that a spirit of tolerance can help with cultural integration. There is no culture which is so superior that it must be adopted at all cost.

25. Many countries are facing and will face the problem of peoples of differing cultures living together. There will be problems in the handling of cultural integration. Where the dominant culture is that of the vast majority, the best solution would be to adopt the dominant culture. But of late we are seeing some resistance on the part of the minorities and this must be handled with tolerance and understanding.

26. Thus in the US the Jews and the Hispanics have succeeded in retaining much of their cultures. In some parts of the US the Spanish language is used officially and as a teaching medium. The Jews on the other hand have been successful in countering the

bias against them and have openly flouted their religion and cultures. They even claim the right to dual citizenship. Their religious holidays have to be respected. But they still claim to be culturally Americans.

27. But cultural integration is not just a national problem. It is also an international problem.

28. It has become so because of the development of communications technology, especially television with its real time news broadcast 24 hours a day. It has brought the world into everyone's living room. This is fine if not for the fact that English has become, by an accident of history, the lingua franca of the world and the Europeans, whether English speakers or not, have quickly seized the opportunity to present their perceptions of things over the air waves.

29. Between Hollywood and the electronic media, the culture of the ethnic Europeans, in particular American culture, have been spread worldwide. There is no culture in the world that is not affected or influenced by this onslaught.

30. The culture of the Americans is very liberal. It is based on absolute individual freedom. Where before pornography was banned now explicit pornography is made available to everyone, including children, on the Internet. There is no doubt that this destroys the moral values of other cultures. In fact such pornography can be directly linked to sex crimes and murder.

31. But the Americans will not stop the advertisements of pornography including video clips through the internet. Their culture insists that freedom is far more important than the destruction of moral values which it may cause.

32. Ethnic European's culture of today is permissive so that homosexuality, same sex marriages are almost encouraged. Even priests openly flout their homosexuality in the name of freedom. Women's bodies are exposed in order to sell everything from automobiles to beverages. And indeed the dresses worn by women expose more of their bodies than they cover. Yet if anyone looks at the exposed parts, this would constitute sexual harassment and the person can be sued and made to pay millions in damages.

33. The ethnic European society is litigious. Friends and family members can be sued for millions if an accident hurts anyone.

34. Love no longer exists in the ethnic European culture since it is now interpreted as meaning the sex act. There is no feeling of fondness or desire for companionship for life between men and women. The only desire is for the sexual act, causal and totally bereft of any noble feelings. After the sexual desire is satisfied the relationship is terminated.

35. Children are born of these liaisons who may not know their fathers. And not knowing this, brothers and sisters can commit incest and beget inbred children. In fact the ban on incest is being questioned now. Why shouldn't brothers and sisters marry if they so desire?

36. Obviously the culture of the ethnic Europeans, which is touted as the universal culture, threatens other cultures in a world of countries that can no longer be separated

by borders. How does the world deal with this? How do non-Europeans preserve their cultures if they don't want to be polluted through domination, assimilation or integration?

37. One of the values touted by ethnic European cultures is freedom of expression, freedom of the press. When this was first mooted, speech and press were limited in their reach. In any case the European societies which preached these freedoms were conservative and their value systems did not permit such a high degree of societal freedom.

38. But once the principle of freedom of expression was accepted, its interpretation began to be widened and deepened. What was proscribed when freedom of expression was first mooted could not be proscribed if society professes to believe in freedom. Anyone or any group of people wanting to do anything, no matter how offensive to other people must be allowed if freedom is really going to mean freedom.

39. Justice too is being reinterpreted to give meaning to freedom. We now hear that the independence of nations does not mean that other countries cannot force an independent nation to change the Government and to install one which meets certain specifications. That the people of the country do not want to accept the culture that is to be imposed upon it is no reason why force should not be used to ensure the acceptance. That the use of force is contrary to the concept of freedom of choice is not of concern to the liberal democrat enforcers.

40. The evolution of the liberal culture is still going on. In the name of freedom anything can be done. But there is no freedom to reject this culture of absolute freedom.

41. In the face of all these can there be cultural integration? Is it not possible for cultures to isolate themselves, to preserve themselves? Must there be integration when integration is likely to destroy one culture and preserve only the moral depravity as shown by the culture of the ethnic Europeans.

42. There has been talk of a clash of civilisations. The present conflict between the Muslims and the ethnic Europeans is not a clash of civilisations. It is nothing more than the struggle of the Muslims to regain land which had been wrested from them to create the State of Israel. Give back the land and the Muslims will live in peace with the Israelis and their ethnic European backers.

43. But a clash of cultures seems to be building up. Muslims and many others cannot accept the culture of the ethnic European. It is not a Christian culture. It has nothing to do with religion. If at all it is an anti-religious culture based on hedonism and the satisfaction of animal desires.

44. There is no scope for integration here, not even for values such as justice and fair-play. The culture that is being promoted by the ethnic Europeans as the universal culture must be confined to them alone. They must not be allowed to have it integrated with other cultures simply because other cultures will simply fail and collapse as moral values are rejected or interpreted to mean quite the opposite. Thus what their own religion says is a sin is now openly practiced as a virtue by their very spiritual advocates.

45. There can be integration of some cultures as I have mentioned earlier. But there can be no integration between the inherent cultures of the Asian and African civilisations with the culture of the ethnic Europeans.

46. Modern enlightenment based on science rejects the belief in retribution for sins. But when the peoples of the world do not know who their parents are and incest; homosexual relations, injustice, the oppression of the weak by the strong are sanctified in the name of liberal culture, it is entirely possible for disasters to befall the world as divine retribution.

47. We have to be careful that the desire for cultural integration will not destroy all the high moral values that we cherish.