

Some Challenges in Managing Cultural Differences in a Multi-Ethnic Country: Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

To develop an united nation of different ethnic groups is hard. It requires the ability of all the people from different ethnic groups to understand, communicate and interact with one another and work together to create a broad-and-inclusive space for new national political discourse to replace the existing narrow-and-exclusive political interests. This would involve a new cultural competence and cultural literacy which include awareness of one's own cultural worldview and attitude towards the cultural differences, knowledge of different cultural practices and worldviews, and cross-cultural skills. As it is, many Malaysians have learnt and developed the skills, but many others have not. This would involve a process to continuously examine biases and prejudices to develop new cross-cultural skills to share a passion for cultural competence. Malaysia has a rich cultural diversity that could be harnessed for the nation's benefit. Sadly, the differences among us form the bases of fear, suspicion, misunderstanding, clashes and conflict. Just consider how dull life would it be if we all look, think and act alike. By learning to recognise our similarities and appreciate our differences, we can overcome prejudice and work towards a more peaceful and productive nation. This article touches on the importance of education in the broadest meaning of learning to accept and respect the differences as the right way to everyone from different ethnic groups to grasp the values, norms, and traditions which would affect how we perceive, think, interact and share the nation with one another.

Key words: broad-and-inclusive space, new national political discourse, new cultural competence and cultural literacy, cross-cultural skills, appreciate our differences

ABSTRAK

Membina sebuah negara yang bersatu padu daripada pelbagai kumpulan etnik adalah sukar. Ia memerlukan kebolehan semua orang daripada kumpulan etnik yang berlainan untuk memahami, berkomunikasi dan berinteraksi antara satu dengan yang lain dan bekerja bersama-sama untuk mencipta ruang yang luas dan inklusif untuk mendapatkan wahana politik kebangsaan yang baru untuk menggantikan kepentingan politik yang sempit dan eksklusif yang ada. Ini tentunya akan melibatkan semacam kemahiran budaya dan literasi budaya yang baru yang akan meliputi kesedaran diri masing-masing terhadap perbezaan pandangan dan sikap mereka sendiri tentang perbezaan amalan budaya, pandangan dunia dan kemahiran lintas-budaya. Seperti yang diketahui, memang sebilangan besar rakyat Malaysia sudah tahu dan mempunyai kemahiran yang disebut itu, tetapi yang lain belum. Sehubungan itu, pembinaan negara yang bersatu padu yang dikehendaki itu memerlukan proses yang terus-menerus untuk mengkaji isu seperti berat sebelah dan prasangka dalam proses pembinaan kemahiran lintas-budaya yang baru itu agar mereka dapat mempunyai keghairahan bersama tentang kemahiran budaya. Di sini, kepelbagaian budaya yang kaya di Malaysia mesti dimanfaatkan demi kepentingan negara. Tetapi, perbezaan di kalangan rakyat kita telah menjadi asas pembentukan perasaan takut, curiga, salah faham, pertengkaran dan konflik. Elok kita bertepuk dada dan menanya selera, tidakkah jemu sekiranya kesemua kita kelihatan, bertindak dan mempunyai fikiran yang sama? Ramai orang yakin belajar untuk mengakui persamaan dan menghargai perbezaan sesama kita boleh membuka jalan baru untuk kita mengatasi prasangka, malahan menolong dalam usaha membina negara ini menjadi lebih aman dan produktif. Makalah ini menekankan peri pentingnya pendidikan dalam erti kata yang paling luas bagi kita untuk sama-sama mempelajari, menerima dan menghormati perbezaan antara kumpulan etnik yang berlainan dan mengerti nilai, norma dan tradisi masing-masing agar kita boleh memandang, memikirkan, berinteraksi dan berkongsi negara ini sesama kita.

Kata kunci: ruang luas dan inklusif, wacana politik kebangsaan yang baru, kemahiran kebudayaan baru, kemahiran lintas-budaya, menghormati perbezaan kita

REALITY OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY

So much has been said on nation building (Abdul Rahman Embong 2007; Shamsul Amri 2012; Maya et al. 2010; Smith 1986) and yet racial divide in

Malaysia is widening (Syed Umar Arif 2013). If so, is national unity difficult to achieve and maintain in plural society? If so, is there no stable democratic government in plural society? But, since independence, Malaysian democratic government is

stable because of cooperative attitude and behavior of both the leaders and the people from the different segments of our population in this multi-racial country. Thus, though unity and democracy are difficult in many plural societies (Furnivall 1956), it is not at all impossible to achieve and maintain. Political stability in Malaysia can be observed in the form of political cooperation and coalition of UMNO, MCA, MIC and others in Barisan Nasional, a multi-political party system (Muhammad Ikmal Said & Zahid Emby 1996). But, the challenge we face is this multiracial country is the segmental cleavages, i.e. divisions between different segments of our population because of communal attachments based on language, religion, custom, region, race and blood ties. These so-called “primordial loyalties” are some of the causes of conflicts and misunderstanding up until now (Sherif 1967). So far our solution to specific issues, conflicts, clashes and misunderstandings are consultations, dialogues and new acts, policies, plans and strategies, including *New Economic Policy (NEP)*, *Rukun Negara*, *Wawasan 2020* and *1Malaysia* aimed to promote structural changes in various aspects of life from education to economic to social integration with the ultimate aim in creating idealized multiracial society (Noor Azam 1979). Our challenge is towards national unity, and not racial integration. Many short, medium and long term strategies are designed to promote unity. We are still in midst of the long process of breaking down cultural isolation, leveling barriers to racial interaction and the development of a united nation by drawing on the strengths of our diverse communities (Noraini Othman et al. 2008). Though many of the long list of plans and strategies have not fully achieved their goals, they do lead to improvements in the ways moving forward. The road is long and the process tenuous.

Looking for better ways to combat prejudices, suspicion, differences, misunderstandings that stand between different communities in Malaysia are some of the challenges we are facing. Malaysian government has various programmes supporting and preserving the nation’s ethnic diversity. What is the formula for a better relationship and representation between different cultural communities (Shamsul Amri 2012)? Have we found any? We accept that Malaysia can no longer be a plural society which can also be defined as a society combining ethnic differences. After decades of living together, we are now more aware that all the ethnic groups need to build Malaysia together and die together. Ethnic boundaries arising from our plural society in the past

need to be broken down and replaced with economic interdependence. To do it, we have to mix, interact, share and work together. But, as it stands, our society composed of equal peers looks stable, but with deep social divisions, and big political differences. Our present Malaysian culture has been shaped by its long history of diverse demography (Lim Teck Ghee 2009). The languages, religions, dances, music, architecture, customs and others differ from one ethnic group to the other. But, Chinese culture in Malaysia is an amalgamation of many different Chinese sub-cultures and traditions. So are the Indian and Malay cultures.

MANAGEMENT OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY

As in many other countries, many of us in Malaysia still fear diversity. This is mainly because differences not only make us uncomfortable, but also feel threatened because we perceive people from different ethnic groups pose a challenge to us in many ways, including our usual livelihood and traditional power base. But, we cannot run away from history and reality that Malaysia is a multiracial country. We also cannot run away from the fact of our existing societal organization that we are and will continue to be living and working with our neighbors from people speaking different languages, having different norms and values, as well as adhering to different religions (Abdul Rahman Embong 2007). All these differences can lead us to either new encounters and cooperation, or confrontations and tensions (Sherif 1967; Hasrom 1979). Thus, our cultural diversity triggered by trade, migration and globalization in the past must be accepted as part of our life and nation (Abdul Rahman Embong 2007). This historical and social fact is common too in other countries, including England, Sri Lanka, Fiji, USA and Brazil, to name a few. It has long been found that we prefer to be in a group similar to them. Theoretically, familiarity and similarity breed feelings of liking, comfort and positive emotions, and thus presumably better group relationship, satisfaction and cooperation. On the other hand, cultural differences may lead to more emotional checks and influence emotion. Thus, different ethnic groups behave differently, because different cultures socialize one to regulate emotions according to his or her cultural norms. But, cultural diversity also opens up opportunities in the sense of innovating ideas, creativity and renewal of production and service delivery. In

other words, cultural diversity is a double-edged sword that would bring risks and opportunities, depending on how we look at it and see it. We would have risks should we think negatively of it in terms of miscommunication, conflict and exclusion. But there are opportunities on the other side if we can think positively of it in terms of innovation, creativity, interdependence, better production and higher service delivery. Thus, there is a need for management, policy and intervention to neutralize the risks and take advantage of the opportunities (UNESCO 2002). So far, there are no standard management and policy solutions available to be adopted. Thus, new answers need to be developed in each specific case, place, organization or field based on a sound understanding of the issues involved. This boils down to mutual respect, tolerance and acceptance. Thus, there is need for management and intervention to neutralize the risks and take advantage of the opportunities presented. As there are no ready and standard management policy and solutions available, different answers to different questions need to be found ourselves in each specific case the way Malaysian government does all this while. All the programmes and efforts to promote national unity have been based on a sound understanding of the issues in the framework of particular context from time to time.

Despite of decades living side-by-side, some of us still fear diversity and change as they may make us uncomfortable. These people may feel threatened in one way or the other, especially may perceive increased participation by people from other ethnic groups a challenge to our existing comfort zone and also our power base (Noraini Othman et al. 2008). The key to addressing them is education (Ding 2009) and managing cultural diversity by equipping ourselves with the necessary expertise, tools and skills to neutralize the risks and to take advantage of the opportunities stemming from cultural diversity. It is the social norms that prescribe how one should feel in general and at certain situation. They also influence the ways emotions are experienced and valued. For example, though happiness is generally considered a desirable emotion across cultures, how these emotions are regulated may differ across cultures. Here we see the relation between culture and emotional experiences. These cultural differences can result in social ostracism (Dodbratz & Shanks 2001). Research also suggests that for national unity, efforts should be made to maximize positive emotions and minimize negative emotions by socialization and of course education. We need

to understand other culture well in a multiethnic country. It is the culture that provides structure, guidelines, expectations, and rules as well unwritten codes to help people understand and interpret behaviours. Interestingly these rules and unwritten codes can be learned in schools and universities, and better still in real life situation by mixing around in a socialisation process. It is these cultural norms that influence how people expect emotions to be regulated. They also dictate how positive and negative emotions should be experienced and combined. Thus, they may also guide how people choose to regulate their emotions which ultimately influences an individual's emotional experience. It is these different "unwritten codes" the least understood but play the most important key role in governing the manner certain emotions may be expressed. They are to be the least understood partly because they may be internalized as a function of an individual's culture, gender or family background.

We used to believe that mindsets begin at home, beginning with parents and education. Now, our challenge is can we transform and merge the different ethnic groups who not only think and believe, but also regarded by others as do not have common myths of origin and shared cultural and biological heritage (different culturally, linguistically, religiously etc.) to be a new person who have a sense of collectiveness, to have a new sense of awareness of their belonging to a new common, distinctive group (Abdul Rahman Embong 2007; Norani Othman et al. 2008)? In Malaysia this process has begun to emerge with *Peranakan Baba and Nyonya* in Malacca, Penang and Singapore some 100 years ago. But, it has apparently stopped, due to many social, historical, political, economic and personal reasons. The point here is that this community described as a "*situational ethnicity*" (Okamura 1981) is an ethnic identity that emerged for the moment based on the social setting and situation, and now changed through the course of history. Now, can Rukun Negara, NEP, Vision 2020, and 1 Malaysia help in fostering national unity of the people sharing historical memories, and one or more common elements of culture, including an association with a homeland? Elsewhere we see the development of the political ideology of ethnic nationalism, when the concept of race/ ethnicity is tied to nationalism as in imagined community by Anderson (1991) who sees nations and nationalism developed with the rise of the modern state.

In many ways, our greatest strength is people from different ethnic groups are able, ready and

willing to share, cooperate, give and take as well as sacrifice. It is our shared values that create harmony that endures the test of time. After living together for such a long time, it is easy to anticipate the needs and behavior of one another. Another big and interesting episode is many Chinese and Indian families in Malay villages *already* have multiethnic, multicultural outlook because of the adoption of children from poor Chinese and Indian families by the Malay families. But, they appeared in greater numbers than there are now. It is the adoption and acculturation that form the cornerstone that has helped the villages survive though there was no mixing of culture or multiculturalism then. That was the practical way as multiculturalism might introduce contrasting views and challenges, that would undermine the homogeneity in the villages.

For national unity, we need shared set of beliefs, attitudes, norms, values, and behaviours organized around a central theme. To share the cultures we also share experiences. Because we share values and views, we tend to support decisions even when they are obviously bad. Although many still debating whether Malaysia really is a multicultural society or not, it is a fact that Malaysia has probably entered a stage of multiculturalism and has moved away from its homogenous identity because of many rapid social, economic and political changes taking place. Now, Malaysia is faced by a different decision today: what type of multicultural society do we want?

Living in a multiracial country, we are required to be tolerant. We not only have to respect one another, but also distinguish between tolerance and multiculturalism. One key way to minimize intolerance is through education which can also mean learning to acquire respect for others and vice versa. Here, schools play a critical role in shaping our views about diversity (Ding 2005). It is here that schools can help us to develop attitudes towards cultural diversity by giving us information about cultural heritages from other ethnic groups. By so doing, we understand better that intolerance is hurtful.

Currently there are research programmes earmarked to analyze and neutralize the risks and to take advantages of the opportunities stemming from cultural diversity. But, as things stand now, is it not true that people in different communities don't trust most politicians, leaders, other people and institutions? Is it not because the more racially diverse a multiracial society, the greater the loss of communal trust? Is it not true that in diverse communities, many do not trust others who do not

look, act, behave and think like us? If the effect of diversity is worse than had been imagined, it is not just that we do not trust people who are not like us. Why is it that some from one particular ethnic group do not like, trust and mix with the other from another ethnic group? Is it because of racial prejudice, social isolation, intolerance, misunderstanding, conflict, discrimination, racism and so on? It is a fact that many of the Malays and non-Malays still live, learn, work, play, and entertain separately for many reasons (Hussain Mohd 1981). One of them is the access to the public spheres, including the play grounds and schools, for example, often depends on being comfortable with the norms of the people. A significant number of non-Malays are not comfortable with the Malays and vice versa. This is not by choice, but rather it is because they are isolated socially and culturally. Thus, many still choose to reside in predominantly their ethnic group neighborhood. As a result, it is natural for children from one ethnic group to be unable to interact with friends from another ethnic group because they have been spending their formative years in a community that do not and cannot prepare them for it. The greatest problem now facing our children is their isolation from the children from another culture. Despite the new housing policy in urban areas that aim at mixing the population, and more and more Malay students attending Chinese schools, why racial polarization, communal suspicion, prejudice and others which may lead to racial discrimination, racism and others? The challenges are how to combat and reduce them so that there is a cohesive society (Noor Azam 1979; Loh Kok Wah 2010).

On prejudice, we all have it as we all have to choose, have like and dislike as well as trust and distrust. Prejudice is a preference for or against something and someone, because of past experience and learning. It is often influenced by emotion, instead of rational thinking and logical thought (Allport 1954). Thus, we should not be ashamed of our prejudices, neither should we be judged wrong for having them. After all, it is our right not to like certain food, work, men, place, taste, odour, feeling and so on. But, prejudice is also emotion that can play a critical role in interpersonal relationships and affecting how one relates to the other and thus can have serious social consequences that can result in either maintaining and enhancing positive relationships, or becoming a source of antagonism and discord. Thus, it is not unusual that prejudice comes easily to people whose cultures are different. But, looking down on someone because of race is

racial prejudice. Having racial prejudice is not right, but it is not right too to force one to share something with someone, especially from another ethnic group! What to do? How to reduce racial prejudice? We are told that it is necessary for members in heterogeneous groups to accept one another. How to do it? We know that prejudice can lead to hate which is a strong word. Let us look at the Negroes, or the Blacks in USA. Many of them used to hate the Whites in the past, because of irrational and unfair treatment for centuries in the sense that the Blacks experienced slavery, while Caucasians used the Blacks to accumulate wealth, build corporations and expand businesses. The Blacks claimed that they were so much discriminated that laws were passed to keep them from progressing, including they were forbidden from learning to read. In other words, there had been affirmative actions against the Blacks because of institutionalized racism in the first place. Aware of White's privilege and "imperialism", they were told to learn the history of the Whites which often hide the truth about the Blacks. Of course the situation is different now. How is it done? This involves a long process of management of cultural diversity!

From prejudice comes discrimination which can also be defined as choosing one thing over the other for a reason (Sherif 1967). We choose, thus we discriminate. We discriminate when we pick up something, instead of the other, whether the same, similar or not. But, selecting and choosing one person from a particular ethnic group because of racial policy and some perceived racist belief, instead of merit is racial discrimination. In other words, racial discrimination is when someone from a particular ethnic group is discriminated because of race. Discrimination is about people, while prejudice is about anything. This unfair treatment has denied the other fellow an opportunity he or she rightfully deserved. Racial discrimination is also a form of racism, which is different from prejudice (i.e. personal likes and dislikes). What to do to reduce it?

From racial discrimination comes racism. It is related to a certain belief that people from a particular race used to have certain physical, social, physiological, cultural features and characteristics that tend to influence, deter, harm or deny the rights of someone else from another ethnic group (Miles 1989). This belief may or may not be supported by fact. But, due to the biological, physiological and cultural differences, many of us tend to believe in it. In the real world, people from one race can make fun of another race because of color, culture, religion,

language, custom, belief, ethnic origin and others. This can be seen as a form of racism in a multiracial society. It is also wrong to have racism or to "make fun" of the other because of racial differences! What to do? How to reduce it?

The answers to the above questions are not easy, straight forward and readily available in any plural and multiracial societies. It certainly needs a series of management of cultural diversity policies (UNESCO 2002). Some of them have been covered in the long list of the various programmes, strategies, policies and others that have been earmarked by Malaysian government over the decades. They are thought to be the practical measures to promote a culture of tolerance. But, now, intolerance is on the increase, not necessarily because of race, but also because of social tension due to the rising cost of living and dropping in standard of living. But, the problems at hand are how to reduce cultural isolation which is the half brother of prejudice, racism and others which can lead to racial segregation (Dobratz & Shanks 2001). It is simply the separation of races because of racial prejudice, racial intolerance and others. Lack of inclusivity is also apparent when students in vernacular and national schools are separated and they cannot learn and experience the importance of mixing with students from other ethnic groups, and thus the concept of cultural relativism (Nissim-Sabat 1987) that not only encourages respect and tolerance for all cultures, but also advocates for equality between cultures.

As explained earlier, racial prejudice is preconceived judgments toward a person because of race because of a certain belief that one race is inferior or superior to the other and this belief can cause racial segregation, racial conflicts, misunderstanding and so on. All this while, we are told that we need to emphasize the importance of emotional attraction to reduce misunderstanding, prejudice and others as the binding forces in national unity. What are the binding forces are simply our emotion and desire to be together. This emotional tie is a type of social glue which can hold us together in the sense that it can influence our cohesiveness and commitment as a group. Without it, members of the group may feel, think and act differently as isolated individuals. This can makes them to act more extremely. This is easily said than done. What is feared is the minority of the emotionally extreme members, including some leaders. Holding on to political and economic powers, they could easily influence other members and cause the group to be much more negative than would be expected.

This mood might happen through emotional contagion (Schoenewolf 1990) in which members are “infected” by negative emotions. It is important to be aware of these “emotional extremists” as one apple can spoil the whole barrel. They are difficult to be checked in our racially-based political parties fighting for independence, autonomy and self-sufficiency, thus can create communal barriers (Lim Teck Ghee 2009). Their motives for communal political interest and empowerment, and not social inclusion, is bad. Under the present racially-based political parties, we see different ethnic groups prefer to retain their ethnic identity and prefer separatist policies for themselves, rather than the policies for all ethnicities of the nation.

What is needed badly in management of cultural diversity is interactions which can be expected to provide opportunities for peoples from different ethnic groups to communicate and interact to create mutual understanding and to break down cultural isolation and others which we should avoid as mentioned earlier (Loh Kok Wah 2010). In this context, the challenge is how to avoid presenting any specific ethnic, religious, or cultural community values as central as our goal is not a mono-cultural or mono-ethnic nation. What are the effective multicultural policies for integrating the different segments of the people? As a philosophy, multiculturalism has been claimed to be crucial to the formation of philosophical and social humanism to help build a better, more egalitarian society (Parekh 2002; Crisp & Meleady 2012). This is not to say that all the cultures and the people are equal and the same, and none are superior or inferior. But, as Malay culture is dominant in Malaysia, thus some believe that the promotion of Malay culture is beneficial to the nation. Here, the concept of *Ketuanan Melayu* (Barnar 2004) comes into the picture. But, the others consider this as a form of “cultural imperialism”, if not a threat to other ethnic cultures. The latter also argues that we should not forget that the differences in cultures make the world a rich place where every individual should have the right to uphold his or her own culture. In short, *Ketuanan Melayu* has been criticised as “institutionalized racism” with the rise of the Civil Rights Movement, and the development of academic ethnic studies programmes as a way to uphold contributions by other ethnic groups.

MULTICULTURALISM AND NATIONAL UNITY

Here, we have to ask what do we want? As it is, many would want multiculturalism, and not unity of descent, unity of culture, unity of language, nor unity of religion. Historically, Malaysia has always been a mixture of cultures and Malaysian government has been upholding a policy of community cohesion, emphasizing social cohesion and integration, and not assimilation. So far, some plans and strategies failed because of conflicting ethnic and communal interests. Among the most important and successful policies has been the learning of Bahasa Melayu as national language and language of national unity. Is it not what we want? The debate now is not integration. The term multiculturalism is not much used in Malaysia until recently, and the term *unity in diversity*, that articulates the diversity that shapes the country is more commonly used as can be shown in *Intelok* (Abdullah Hussain 1996). More people now support multiculturalism as it allows people to truly express who they are within a society. They see it a fairer system in the sense that it is not only more tolerant, but also adapts better to our present social issues. Here adaptation is the key word because culture is not one definable thing based on one particular race at any one time, but the result of multiple factors that change as the society and the world changes from time to time (Lim Teck Ghee 2009). So far, multiculturalism is seen as a useful strategy to combat racism, to protect minority communities, and to undo policies that had prevented minorities from having full access to the opportunity, freedom and equality promised. In other words, the key word here is management of cultural diversity. By raising consciousness about the importance of the contribution from other ethnic groups, multiculturalism tries to restore a sense dignity in a postmodern era.

Many see Malaysian Constitution also explicitly promotes multiculturalism, though some 60% of our population are of Malay descent. We need multiculturalism as a feature of Malaysian culture by not only allowing but also supporting all kinds of art or cultural expression from different ethnic groups. So far, many experts have identified intercultural dialogue, awareness-raising, education and criminalization of incitement to hatred and intolerance, as practical measures that could possibly combat intolerance and promote a culture of tolerance (Abdul Rahman Embong 2007;

Lim Teck Ghee 2009). And as it is, Malaysian government has been and should continue to act as catalyst for intercultural dialogue. Here, education and interaction are crucial in fostering respect for all human rights and religious diversity, supplemented by laws, words, deeds and examples to promote harmony and facilitate the intercultural dialogue which helps to create a peaceful and stable society (Loh Kok Wah 2010). The promotion of reciprocal understanding between cultures was also suggested as a measure to combat intolerance. But, from time to time, many of the debates over education and language, for examples, have almost evolved into ethnic misunderstanding which could intensify ethnically polarized societies which must be avoided. Again, this is easily said than done. Nevertheless, regular institutionalized inter-faith debates and dialogues amongst the genuine religious scholars, jurists and experts must continue. But, how to ask political leaders to avoid speaking on sensitive issues, unless the people must learn to manage themselves.

Though we have legislation on freedom of religion and belief and also guidelines to promote national unity, it is still the responsibility of leaders to criticize hateful ideology, prohibit the incitement of sensitive national, racial or religious issues. Though preventive measures are keys to combating intolerance, prejudice and others that we should avoid, it is better still to be able to create a climate that can help to prevent discrimination and violence. After living side by side for decades, witnessing the tragedy of May 13 (Mohd. Taib Osman 1976), and other racial conflicts and misunderstandings, there is this new awareness and realisation that racially-based political parties is somehow bad and that the answer to all our problems is to place national unity first. But, as things stand, it is not easy to push for more nationalistic policies, like a single language medium in education, after decades of multi-language school system at this stage of development. But, eventually our fundamentals are national interest should be everybody else's interests. Malaysian government has at its disposal tools to so that, and also the political will to use them. With strong fundamentals, Malaysia can be another beacon of hope in managing diversity of its multiracial society.

In management of cultural diversity, we believe that education and patriotism (Ding 2004) are the keys to address intolerance and others. Thus, in theory, everybody should be educated to learn to see differences, to cross boundaries, to feel comfortable

mixing with the other and to learn from each other. Again in theory, with that our lives can be improved and better off after understanding and appreciating the best from so many different worlds. But, no one can achieve the above if he or she insists to exist only in his or her own world, i.e. one own ethnic group, religion and family. Education here is not confined to class rooms in schools and colleges, but a life-long process that covers learning to get along with people different from ourselves, building and maintaining a healthy self-identity. In the process, education can play a critical role in shaping our views about diversity, developing our respect for diversity, and understanding that intolerance is hurtful. We need to learn to respect others and not to pre-judge them. After all, there is so much we can learn from people who are different from ourselves, near or far, now or long time ago, especially learning to behave respectfully towards other people and it is wrong to tease or reject a person because of race, religion, appearance, background and so on. We also have to learn to resist bias and to value our differences because of race and religion. Many claim that education and mixing can help us to change things that can and should be changed for the sake of unity.

As mentioned earlier that new housing projects in urban areas in recent years is governed by some kind of ethnic interaction policy in transforming a single-ethnic homogenous community into multiethnic and multicultural ones. But, the point is these "temporary foreign residents" do not make the community a "multicultural" society. If so, can increase in interethnic marriage which is found to be able to lead to the blurring of ethnic lines? No matter what the answer is, we note that while the number of interethnic marriages between the Chinese and Indians is on the rise (Pillay 2013), the inter-ethnic marriage between Malays and non-Malays is proportionately lower now than in the past. In addition, the existence of Chinese *Baba* and *Chetty Peranakan* imply the mixing of Chinese and Indian immigrants with Malays in the past was at their own pace. Now, looking over the shoulder, we are proud to have them mixed from one connected country to one united people, people descended from different ancestors, speaking different languages, professing different religions, attached to the same principles of government, but different in their manners and customs seem - to make this country and its people as if they have been made for each other, and it appeared as if it was the design of our history. But, that "unity" was broken up by ethnic-based political interests. Thus, new strategies like Rukun Negara,

NEP, Vision 2020, 1Malaysia and many others were created to build an ideal new nation-state with more and more Malaysians mixing and living harmoniously. Surely we want more of interethnic marriages that have been found more likely to become poly-ethnic, multicultural and recognize ourselves with more than one ethnic background which is different from the marriage between the Malays, Javanese and Bugis for example.

We have been asking the question: What do we want? What are other ways to achieve national unity? Can Chinese and Indians accept Malay culture to be the core in multiculturalism? Can Malay culture that has co-existed for centuries with other cultures giving it a unique multicultural outlook? Is it a good example of multiculturalism? Do we still want the debate to go on the level of political representation and balance of power between the different ethnic groups?

THE WAY FORWARD

Although there is racial division, there is also a certain degree of mixing of the various ethnic groups in the country. The challenge now is we have to make it widespread. This is because we do not want to see different segments of our people engage in hating and having prejudice one against the other. We certainly need harmonious relationship, mutual respect, trust and unity. A peaceful and stable society which is both a legal and social matter is not at all against our history in the past and our wish in the future, though many describe 1Malaysia and Wawasan 2020 as virtual unity. Is it an illusion? Even if so, it is still worth all our effort and sacrifice as they have a powerful influence on race relationship today in searching for formula to national unity in Malaysia, a nation founded and will continue to be powered by different ethnicities coming together in a multi-racial country, and not a melting pot. The metaphor of melting pot implies that all the cultures are mixed and amalgamated without state intervention.

The idealized unity as reflected in Wawasan 2020 and 1Malaysia is most timely and necessary now than ever. They must be given all the best chance of succeeding as they are pragmatic, moderate and inclusive, thus fits best the ideal of egalitarianism and the principles of justice. We need more open and heart-to-heart dialogues and not less in building the desired national unity. To build and maintain a harmonious multiracial society is a life-long process.

It includes learning to get along with people different from ourselves; to respect others and not to prejudge them. One of the challenges is many of us feel uncomfortable, threatened and challenged by people speaking different languages, having different norms and values and adhering to different religions. These may lead to confrontations, tensions and conflicts. Now, we have to learn to live with cultural diversity, triggered by trade, migration and globalization as part of our history a long time ago. Do we still want to be culturally isolated like before if we continue to exist only in the world of our ethnic group? On the other hand, our lives can be better off when we understand and appreciate the worlds of other ethnic groups only after we cross cultural and racial boundaries and be accepted and feel comfortable in the other worlds which would certainly make our world much bigger, colourful and meaningful.

As explained earlier, diversity can enrich our life, increase our productivity by bringing together the resources and talents of many more people and much more opportunity for the benefit of all (Koster 1999). So, we must not let the differences among us to be the bases of fear, bigotry and violence anymore. Just consider how dull life can be if we all look alike, think alike and act alike! Thus, we must manage diversity by learning to recognise our similarities and appreciate our differences. This is one way to overcome prejudice and work towards a more peaceful and stable country.

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