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A letter must have a writer's name, signature, home address, phone and MyKad numbers. It should ideally not be more than 500 words. The editor reserves the right to edit a letter for clarity and length.

LETTERS

CULTURAL IDENTITY

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE MALAY

ACCORDING to Article 160 of the Constitution, a Malay is defined as someone who professes to be a Muslim, habitually speaks Malay and adheres to Malay customs. Therefore, I am constitutionally defined as a Malay.

However, this does not erase the fact that my paternal grandfather, Pateh Akhir, was of Bugis descent and my maternal grandfather, Abu Bakar, was of Thai descent.

To me, culture and cultural identity are interesting topics. When discussing cultural identity, people often look at a person's history, ancestry and clothing as identifying markers.

I remember sitting in my visual culture seminar, when I was doing my PhD in Vienna, Austria, when my lecturer, Professor Filitz, asked me: "What makes you a Malay?"

Confidently, I said I spoke Bahasa Malaysia, wore baju kurung and celebrated Eid.

He said: "Does this mean, by sitting here in my class, wearing a pair of jeans and Adidas sneakers, and speaking in English, you are not a Malay?"

I was stumped. Growing up, I had always assumed that cultural denominators, like clothes and language, were elements that made us culturally distinct.

To me, the basis of culture is made up of differences because we are as-

signed in a system that categorises us in groups, as exemplified by the racial categorisation that we adhere to when filling in forms and answering demographic questions.

According to Filitz, this made me an essentialist. He said I had a utopian idea of what a Malay should be like, and that I had failed to realise that culture was constantly evolving.

How was I sure that the concept of Malayness that I practised and believed in was the original Malay culture practised centuries ago?

"How can you put culture in a box?" Filitz said.

That made me question myself. When getting dressed for work, I prefer suits than baju kurung.

I express myself better in English. I am not well versed with the names of Malay kuih. Does that make me less Malay?

Scholar Anthony Giddens said globalisation played a big role in how cultures were practised. He said new technologies and developments had encouraged people to venture out of their comfort zones to travel or immigrate.

This increase in mobility makes it possible for cultural activities to be practised anywhere and for people to know cultures from around the world.

Interestingly, nowadays, people do not have to travel to experience other cultures.

The Internet and advanced technology have enabled people to offer recommendations for French cuisine in Paris, despite not being there.

One can learn how to speak Korean from YouTube videos or experience Bhutan through an Instagram account.

This virtual movement provides choices as to how people could construct their cultural identity.

These options enable people to pick any style or personality they want and mix and match it to construct their identity.

So, would it be possible for people to claim that they are purebred Malays, Chinese and Indians?

I believe that cultural identity is immeasurable. For instance, no particular sect of Malay – Javanese, Bugis and Boyan – is more superior than the other.

My limited knowledge of Malay *syair* or penchant for hot mocha and dim sum should not be a reflection of my level of Malayness.

Stuart Hall aptly said cultural identity was fluid and constantly changing.

Thus, as an individual, I can choose to adapt, change or omit any cultural element to construct my own cultural identity.

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