

Don't make the past history

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Comment

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I WAS recently in Seoul, Korea for a seminar on Education for International Understanding. Participants paid a visit to Seoul National University to learn how the Koreans implement the subject of the seminar there.

I met one bright student who has been to Malacca for a recent conference on the same theme. Among other things, I learnt that he was informed that Putrajaya was created in order to segregate Malaysians ethnically. And this made a lasting impression on him.

This type of misinformation is of malicious intent or originates from utter ignorance of the facts! Putrajaya is barely a decade old and there is such misinformation. What of facts about the Sultanate of Malacca, for instance, which took place centuries ago?

This is more than just about dates and time. More importantly, it is about the significance of an event itself, and that of the surrounding issues that led to it. While it is tied to a period in history, history is more than that! So what is history?

We all make history of our own. We have a past — that is our personal history. There are not too many dates that we care to remember — only exceptional ones such as birthdays. Events are vividly recalled even when the dates are quite blur to the mind. What is important is what impacted our lives, shaped our outlook and crafted our actions and destinies. Past events provide intrinsic lessons for us and others who know about them. And, as the saying goes, those who ignore history are doomed to repeat it.

In attempting to learn or teach History, drawing from the substantive lesson must be the objective. Students have been memorising dates for too long. This is hardly history. What is the point of knowing that 1957 is the year of our independence if the vital information leading up to the historic event is glossed over.

We must be first honest with ourselves before we can be honest about history. Those who have been caught lying in public about their past may have few qualms in manipulating history for their own end. History is not about justifying political survival and interpreting it according to a vested interest.

In the book *The Uses And Abuses of History* by Margaret Macmillan, we are reminded: "The past can be used for almost anything you want to do in the present. We abuse it when we create lies about the past or write histories that show only one perspective. We can draw lessons carefully or badly."

This is not as unusual as you think, considering many mainstream concepts and ideas are presented as historical phenomena.

Although they are developed in one provincial area of the world, they are later imposed on the rest as though they are equally relevant. Or they are disguised as "international" if the ideas are Eurocentric or Anglo-centric, for example. The likelihood of this happening is high since it is now recognised that it is the winners — in this case, almost always the colonial masters — who get to write and rewrite history from a particular socio-cultural tradition.

Syed Farid Alatas, makes specific mention of the concept of "religion" being universal when "the understanding of what makes up religion in phenomenological, historical and sociological terms is often derived from Christianity".

And Islam is regarded as the "hidden" cultural Christianisation of the Muslim world since it is also dubbed a "religion" and "intellectually reconstructed after the image of Christianity due to the very concept employed by the disciplines that study religions".

Some 400,000 WikiLeaks papers that detail secret military reports on the United States-led Iraq war present yet another form of lies that the victors would otherwise incorporate in history.

In this sense, WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange is right when he says that the documents reveal the "truth" about the conflicts.

A more blatant occurrence is what Cambridge University Emeritus Professor of Social Anthropology Jack Goody refers to as the "theft" of history. Goody examines what he termed the "theft" by the West of the achievements of other cultures and the consequences.

Learning History IS not as simple and straightforward as it is made out to be.

Neither is it as boring and dry as some allege. History is very much alive because we draw useful lessons so that we do not fall into the same trap again or model our actions on what is successful.

It remains a vital series of moral tales and instil commitment as well as transmit values.

The decision to make it a must-pass subject is a step in the direction. It is also better to be taught in Bahasa Malaysia in order to capture subtle nuances. Preparation must be meticulous; failure is not an option.

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