

Whose is it anyway?

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Comment

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THE recent spat over the cultural claims by Indonesia offers another dimension on the understanding of the 1Malaysia concept.

First and above all, it boils down to our weakness, if not failure, to articulate what precisely is Malaysian culture, which now assumes a rather amorphous dimension given the multicultural dimensions of the Malaysian cultural horizon.

If it is to be "Truly Asia", then which Asia? Including Indonesia? Not any more it seems.

Previously, a Malaysian of a Javanese descent, for example, is deemed to make up part of the Malaysian culture, but now this can be challenged by our neighbours, just as in the case of a Balinese dancer who appeared in the fateful Enigmatic Malaysia programme on the Discovery channel.

The fact that apologies have been extended for such a "mistake" reaffirms that the cultural heritage of Indonesian descendants in Malaysia -- from the Minangkabau to the Javanese and more -- are anything but Malaysian, at least culturally speaking.

And by extension they are identified as Malaysian Javanese, and so on, rather than Javanese Malaysian, or anything similar to that of African Americans.

Meaning to say, they are Americans first, and the African bit is a mere variation of the dominant American culture; and therefore, they have nothing to apologise for.

On the contrary, following our apologies over the Balinese dance incident, the implications are the opposite, suggesting a tremendous consequent to the dominant Malaysian culture itself: if there is such a thing.

To some Indonesians, Malaysians have no indigenous culture; everything is borrowed, now deemed as "stolen".

Otherwise, under the context of 1Malaysia's "unity in diversity" this is just it, namely Malaysian culture is the sum of the potpourri of many cultures belonging to each descendant it represents.

They are not in any way "stolen" or "borrowed" rather they are just Malaysian given the diversity of its population. Just like there can be a Javanese Malaysian, so too the culture.

With the recent vehement Indonesian protests, resulting in apologies being tendered, they strongly signalled that this is no longer possible. Indonesian culture in all its shades, in fact belongs to Indonesia. Period.

It then brings us back to the basic question: what is Malaysian culture? Incidentally, "Melayu" is just one of the many ethnicities that makes up Indonesia.

We need to be careful in assuming the role of the Malay culture as such as the dominant culture for Malaysia, lest we run the same risk again.

The Nusantara slant somehow does not apply here, amidst the oft-repeated claims of being "serumpun".

In a similar vein, should China and India, for example, adopt the same attitude as Indonesia (which is not inconceivable), then the Malaysian culture will be really in a state of flux.

Even though it might not happen at all, the principle is the same. After all, we still prefer to identify ourselves as [if not Malaysia Chinese and Indian], and by the same logic, it is the cultures of the Chinese (read: China) and of the (Indians read: India, perhaps Tamil Nadu).

What part of it, therefore, makes up the Malaysian culture remains to be answered.

That the performers are citizens of Malaysia do not necessarily make their culture a Malaysian one. More likely it remains a Chinese or Indian culture performed by a Malaysian, who could be a Kadazan.

In other words, the "unity in diversity" 1Malaysia idea needs to be revisited, as the "potpourri" model of culture which is made up of a blended "scent" is no longer a tenable argument, at least for now.

Of course, it is not confined just to dances, but includes songs as well (remember late 2007, Malaysia was to

be sued for using traditional Indonesian songs), though the latter case is more straightforward.

An Indonesian song sung by others would still belong to Indonesia, whether or not the lyrics are translated. And so, too, the other facets of the cultures.

The Indonesian culture and tourism minister made this clear when he wrote a protest note last week to Malaysia citing the violation of the 2007 agreement to honour each other's cultural heritage.

Better late than never, the sensible thing to do is to begin delineating in earnest our national culture that we have taken for granted for too long. In the wake of all this, the Indonesians are doing the same, too.

Of late, the effort to declare what are the Malaysian kuih is a step in the right direction, though we have barely started the process.

We need to do more so that others do not claim (if not steal) our local flowers and fruits as theirs to be exported, let alone the songs and dances.

So far we have been civil but clearly this not the way forward in the realm of culture, ironically.

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