

## A true Malaysian

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Article

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EACH time we celebrate Malaysia Day on Sept 16, the question of Bangsa Malaysia pops up. Where are we in our search for a national identity and culture?

As we mull over this question, one cannot help but recall the analogy of a dog's barking to that of a call to prayer made some time ago and wonder what would be the implication of such thinking on the country's future.

The fact that it was published in the Bar Council's **Infoline** (May/June) adds to the concern.

Comparing the barking of a dog to human activity is not acceptable under any circumstance, what more associating to activities that are sacred.

It could have been any number of similar activities which make up Malaysia's cultural diversity.

They are deep-rooted practices and which give humankind and Malaysia its sense of oneness in diversity.

Seen from this perspective, the suggested analogy is not only unfortunate, but insensitive, arrogant and un-Malaysia.

It is just as repugnant as the 'Dogs and blacks not allowed' signs seen during the dark days of apartheid South Africa.

History tells us that such insensitive statements are oft-times fuelled by a deeper sense of resentment.

And if this is true, it is even more worrying because by and large it distracts us from the effort of building a united Malaysia.

This is even more pertinent if what Amy Chua, a Yale professor, discussed in her book *World on Fire* is taken into account.

The book is instructive in attempting to understand some of the intricate aspects of such resentment.

For example, Chua recalled what her aunt said when asked about the ethnic Filipinos who worked for family:

"Aunt Leona explained that servants were fortunate to be working for our family. Otherwise, they would be living among rats and open sewers without even a roof over their heads."

Aunt Leona was later murdered by her Filipino chauffeur. That Aunt Leona was the victim of her own insensitivity and arrogance cannot be dismissed.

There are other worrying aspects if one were to accept the analogy presented at face value.

It could mean many of our rich multicultural practices have to be 'silent' just because some prefer to debase it to mere sources of noise pollution.

More worrying still is that it involves a learned professional affiliated to an educated community.

And especially so at a time when universities and institutions of higher learning around the world are grappling to accommodate multi-culturalism as a celebration of human diversity.

As serious suggestions pour in on to how to bring out such wealth of diversity as part of the learning environment, we are rudely awakened by an awkward analogy.

Could this be a reflection of a failure of our professionals as a community of intellectuals?

In attempting to answer this, the works of the late Edward Said come to mind.

In *Representations of the Intellectual* (1994), he listed 'specialisation' as one of the pressures challenging the ingenuity and will of intellectuals.

By this he refers to the relatively narrow scope of knowledge one is limited to.

It is not the specialised competence he is worried about, but "losing sight of anything outside one's immediate field".

Could this be something that should concern us, this inability to deal with areas beyond one's area of specialisation?

Closely linked to specialisation is the notion of "expertise and the cult of the certified expert".

Certified by the proper authorities, one is instructed in speaking the right language, citing the right authorities, holding down the right territory.

Knowledge is intellectually much broader than just possessing qualifications and expertise.

For a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious Malaysia, the demand for broad-based knowledge is even more crucial.

In short, instead of becoming merely a paragon of the animal kingdom, we need to strive to assert our humanness over the vestiges of animal instinct.

Humanity cannot be taken for granted if experts and specialists are to contribute to lasting public good.

Lest we forget, this is what Malaysia needs most, a Bangsa Malaysia in which oneness in diversity must be preserved at all cost.

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