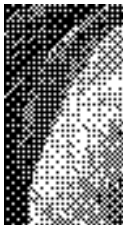
developing the language of malaysia: the role of culture and literature



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The Story of Nation-Building

This year marks the 100th year anniversary of the Indonesian writer and intellectual, Pramoedya Ananta Toer. Born on the 6th of February, 2025, Pramoedya or better known as Pram, was a master of writing and story-telling. Amongst some of his prominent works include the four series of Buru novels, consisting of Bumi Manusia (Earth of Mankind), Anak Semua Bangsa (This Earth of Mankind), Jejak Langkah (Footsteps) and Rumah Kaca (House of Glass); Cerita dari Blora (Stories from Blora); Bukan Pasar Malam (It's Not an All Night Fair); and Gadis Pantai (Girl from the Coast).

The stories of Pram, while simple and direct, articulate profoundly the meaning of humanity, the tribulations of social struggle, the depths of the human soul and ethics, and the courage of conviction in the face of adversity (see **note 1**).

His range of works span the period where the Indonesian nation became aware of herself, and the moments where her people possessed consciousness of its historical position and future (see **note 2**). If one was to be asked to read only one book from his literary oeuvre to discern the significance of national consciousness, that would be Bumi Manusia.

Writing the Malaysian Nation

In Malaysia, such a sense of historical consciousness and of a shared future was also expressed through the craft of story-telling and writing under the broader umbrella of culture and literature. Story-telling, in Malay, can be translated as *bercerita*. The story teller, in Malay, can be translated as *penglipur lara*, as it has a long tradition and rich history in Malay and Nusantara (the Malay World or Archipelago) culture. Through time, the story teller as well as writing evolved from forms and devices of mythical expressions to realism. Thus, many of the early Malay nationalists in the 1930s and 40s in colonial Malaya were also writers and *budayawan* (cultural figures). Advocating the principle of *seni untuk masyarakat* or art for society, these figures such as Ahmad Boestamam, Usman Awang, A. Samad Ismail, Keris Mas, and A Samad Said, among others, called for the usage of culture, literature and language as a vehicle of nation-building and to realize the Malaysian nation. A society founded on social justice, ethnic and national unity, equity, and social progress and development were some of the ideals propagated by the practitioners of art for society (see **note 3**). For what is a nation, if not a form of narrative or a process of story-telling?

Many Stories, Different Conditions: Challenges in Nation-Building

Where are we in this story of nation-building, and how have we fared in this conversation of the nation? The ibu pertiwi or tanah ayer of Malaysia is trying very hard to find her identity. In a recent book published by Ooi Kee Beng, The Reluctant Nation: Malaysia and its Vain Quest for Common Purpose, he restates the question of nation-building. For Malaysia, after having gone through various phases and arriving at what Kee Beng terms as Malaysia 5.0, the idea of nationhood remains elusive. This is aggravated by, he highlights, the lack of clear ideas as to what common purpose entails or the absence of a sense of the common. Kee Beng notes how many challenges at the level of institutions, the economy and governance including federal-state dynamics limit the inculcation of a sense of nationhood, or 'Malaysia Building' as he calls it.

The occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic has made this endeavor additionally difficult, and painful; it has stalled, if not set back, the progress that Malaysian society has made in the democratic, economic and social domains. Both the Malaysian State and society are in the process of recovery and have rejuvenated significantly in the economy and in political stability. Critical challenges, however, persist. Among of which is patchy economic development characterized by wealth accumulation and the increasing financialization of social and economic life (see **note 4**). Another is the increasing dominance of the social media platforms and the proliferation of artificial intelligence systems. The latter in particular, while useful in providing information and assisting in undertaking daily tasks and work such as writing and management, on the flipside fosters a culture of mediocrity. Originality is stifled, a trait that is unique to the human disposition and temperament, and human experience.

The Story of Malaysia: Renewing the Project of Nation-Building

These challenges, and the absence of a narrative of national unity and identity, places the Malaysian nation-building project at risk. With that in mind, where and how do we go from here? In moving forward, the importance of culture, or *budaya* in Malay, should be emphasized and elevated as a central component of national and development planning. The word *budaya*, is a combination of the terms *budi*, which refers to the intellect, and *daya*, which means struggle or exertion. Additionally, *budi* as intellect connotes not only reason or rational thought, but also includes the dimensions of ethics and aesthetics. *Budi* in Malay discourse, therefore, means not only the use of reason but also ethical practice. To have *budaya*, or to be someone that is *berbudaya*, hence signifies the struggle to uphold and practice the intellect in all its dimensions.

At the institutional level, the Ministry of National Unity as well as the Minister of Tourism, Arts and Culture possess pivotal functions. Through these ministries, the practices of culture and national unity is not only an end itself, but means to other ends. These may include sustainable and equitable development, ecological and environmental justice, intellectual and technological excellence, and political stability and social harmony.

More opportunities and spaces should also be open to youths and the younger generation to be involved in the nation-building process. It includes attracting them to be involved in the decision-making process whether at the national, state, local authority or community levels; supporting and expanding the fields of creative arts and the humanities; develop economic opportunities in the arts and culture sector; and enhancing the role of Malaysia not only as a cultural consumer, but also a producer of cultural and artistic goods, both intangible and tangible, at the regional and global levels.

Under the leadership of our Prime Minister, with his affinity for the culture, arts, and literature, and Malaysia's role as the chair of ASEAN in 2025, there is immense potential and possibilities to place the advancement of culture at the center of the national agenda and progress, and thus to give renewed impetus to the project of nation-building, in a Malaysia where no one is left behind.

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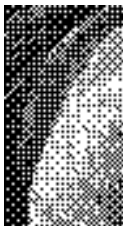

note

note 1: Please see Patricia B. Henry, The Writer's Responsibility: A Preliminary Look at the Depiction and Construction of Indonesia in the Works of Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, Vol. 6, No. 2, 1991, pp. 59-72; A. Teeuw, The Ideology of Nationalism in Pramoedya Ananta Toer's Fiction, Indonesia and the Malay World, 25: 73, 252-269, 1997

note 2: Please see Benedict Anderson, Indonesian Nationalism Today and in the Future, Indonesia, 67, April (1999), pp. 1-11

note 3: Please see Revisiting Malaya: Uncovering Historical and Political Thoughts in Nusantara, (eds.) Show Ying Xin & Ngoi Guat Peng (SIRD, 2020)

note 4: Please see The Financialization of Our Lives: Values and Trade-Offs, Khazanah Research Institute, 2024

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