

RSOG INSIGHT

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MULTICULTURALISM EXPLORED

By **Satya Rekha**

Multiculturalism is a unique term that has been widely used around the globe. What is multiculturalism? There are many definitions and interpretations on the concept of multiculturalism. The term itself is a combination of the word 'multi' and 'culture'. According to social anthropologist Margaret Mead, the word "culture" is defined as a set of social systems, symbols, representations and practices of signification held by a certain group.¹ In *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory*, Bhiku Parekh offered his perspective that human life is organised by a historically created system of meaning and significance, and in turn this is what we call culture.² In his article, *What Do We Mean by Managing Diversity?* Caleb Rosado³ explained that the concept of multiculturalism embodies a new orientation toward the future. He further illustrated that the needs for the 21st century demand a citizenry that is culturally sensitive and internationally focused. This is a realistic description of many societies that are home to diverse communities. In his work, he suggested that some of the approaches to manage diversity is to recognise diversity, respect

minority groups, acknowledge cultural expression, encourage and enable contribution of the various communities and empowerment.

Sociologists use the concept of multiculturalism to describe one way of approaching cultural diversity within a society. In plain context, the word multicultural describes something that incorporates ideas, beliefs or people from many different countries and cultural background. Today, multiculturalism is often associated with the idea of integration, inclusivity and respect for one another. Multiculturalism represents the ideals of living and interacting with people from different backgrounds. This way of life has been an integral part of society and has evolved through times. Different countries and continents have their own unique history on the origins of multiculturalism. Several historical events such as mass migration, war, political instability, colonialism and similarities in race and religion and current socio-economic trends such as seeking better economic opportunities, and attainment of quality education are some of the

¹ Rodrigues, L. C. (n.d.). Multiculturalism. Retrieved from <http://www.iep.utm.edu/multicul/>

² Parekh, B. C. (2011). *Rethinking multiculturalism: cultural diversity and political theory*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

³ Rosado, C. (2006). What do We Mean by "Managing Diversity?". *Workforce Diversity: Concepts and Cases*, 3, 1-15

reasons why an individual, families or communities choose to migrate to a different country. In this regard, the emergence of a new culture co-existing with the inherent and dominant culture in a society has created the concept of multiculturalism.

Multiculturalism considers each race as equal and espouses the concept of fair and equal appearance of all cultural groups in public and private institutional environment and creating a balance between races or languages. Interestingly, the most important groups or states today consist of seven or eight major civilisations. These are new realities in most societies. Lilla Berkes in her article *The Development and the Meaning of the Concept of Multiculturalism* shared her insights that cultural differences are the new norm and adapting the concept of acceptance and tolerance is essential to live harmoniously.⁴

However, embracing and adopting the concept of multiculturalism has its fair share of negative perception and criticism. Some people perceive multiculturalism as a threat to the existing culture or norm in a society. Concerns arise because of the misconception that new ethnic groups and culture will influence the current norms or practices in a society that could result in the dominant culture losing its identity and

influence on most of the population. Each country has its own unique history and origins on the concept of multiculturalism.

Multiculturalism has influenced the structure of society in more ways than one. For example, with a fusion of several cultures in society, it creates an environment that is rich with tradition and diverse identities. Multiculturalism also promotes unity, cohesiveness, and inclusion among the various races. Many countries and societies have embraced the concept of multiculturalism in their respective social groups. The workforce is no exception.

Many organisations are now hiring a more multiracial workforce. Many studies have shown that a workforce which is more diverse tend to address and resolve workplace issues and challenges in a more creative and innovative way.

Today, the concept of multiculturalism has been widely accepted especially by the younger generation. The young people are inclined to be more open and accepting to a person of a different racial background as compared to the earlier generations. Hence, it is important for multiculturalism to be accepted as part of society and preserved for many more generations to come.

⁴ Berkes, L. (2010). *The Development and Meaning of the Concept of Multiculturalism*. *Delkelet- Europa-South-East Europe: International Relations Quarterly*, 1(4).

Article

RUMAH KITA

By **Ismail Johari Othman**

Over 30 years ago, legendary singer and unity icon, Sudirman Haji Arshad wrote and recorded a tribute song entitled *Bapak*. One of the lines in the song was “...*Bapak...ini rumah kita...pusaka peninggalan...untuk keluarga yang merdeka...*”, which literally means “this is our house inherited from the founding fathers for us to stay independently”. The house he referred to is Malaysia, which celebrated its 60th anniversary on 31 August 2017. If one is working, 60 is the mandatory retirement age. However, many may think that with the current advancements, many more milestones can be gained. Based on the aforementioned, this article intends to reflect visible broad changes that have taken place and some possible approaches that could be considered as far as leadership skills are concerned.

Like any other man-made structure, the house wears down over time. Some parts may need replacing, some need rearranging, and some require a facelift. It is quite natural for those who live in the house to have differing opinions over house improvements or arrangements; be it now and in the future. Perhaps such differences are influenced by the individual

experiences that one has with the house. Be that as it may, it is still *rumah kita*.

Of course, the house has its limitations. Some leave the house for greener pastures – often with the determination to contribute back to the house in the future. Some have no choice but to stay through thick and thin. Those who are more privileged can come and go at their convenience. In such a dynamic environment, diverse sentiments over the house are bound to be observed. In the pursuit of a shared ideal perspective, respect must always be upheld as this is *rumah kita*.

Technology certainly help and at times, does wonders. Gone are the days where what goes in and out of the house is visible to the naked eye. For example, parents used to know practically all their children's friends as there was only one house telephone that was shared by everyone. This is a stark contrast to the information communication technology we have today – which is often mobile, personalised, direct, and rapid. Such a change may probably create some discomfort as it is human nature to have a sense of control in their day to day life. Like it or not, this is *rumah kita*.

Rumah terbuka or open house is one of the central features in the Malaysian way of life, often observed during the month-long celebration of Eid¹. Such a welcoming nature attracts many guests to come over. While some do leave after reaching certain accomplishments, some have chosen to stay put. Some, who initially came individually, would even bring their family. There is a saying that the more the merrier, but some may argue otherwise – the fewer, the better fare. Diverse, and at times extreme or parochial views are becoming a norm. Therefore, acknowledging these contrarian perspectives is necessary. These trends are observed in certain developed nations, judging from their recent election results. It seems that these challenges will be around in times to come with limited options for policy response in sight. Whatever it is, this is *rumah kita*.

Apparently, one of the things that one is unable to choose in life is its neighbour – though this may not apply in a more affluent segment of society where birds of a feather flock together. Geographically, Malaysia is in one of the most vibrant region in the planet. The region's young population, pleasant climate, and favourable maritime and airspace connectivity has somewhat attracted a huge amount of investment of late from other parts of the world. Having said that, such dynamism in this region can be traced as far as five centuries ago –

where it consisted of several rather fragmented polity as compared to a group of a few independent nations, as observed today. In consideration of these different dynamics, the understandings that were reached in the past probably lacked solid guidance for generations to follow. To some extent, it may have influenced the interactions in this region, where at times it could be challenging. But this is where *rumah kita* exists.

Now, what lies ahead for *rumah kita*? Lately, the call for *meaning* seems to be louder than before. Questions, such as “*why are we doing this, why not that, why now*” are heard more often. Based on the earlier discussion, such urges from the public poses some challenges for leaders. Perhaps, this explains why the initiatives to listen, engage, and collaborate are being intensified². The feedback, criticisms, views, and alternatives are tirelessly reflected, often reconciled, with past trends. The selection of the song³ *Di Sini Lahirnya Sebuah Cinta* as the theme for last year's Independence Day is a move in the right direction to encourage reflection for meaning in a creative way.

The rigorous reflection on the meaning could lead to *clarity*. Clarity⁴ of ideas played a huge role in the ground-breaking days of *Amanah Saham Nasional* in 1981. Nobody would have thought that such level of sophistication in the scheme could be

¹ Open house is also held in conjunction with other festivities such as Chinese New Year, Deepavalli and Christmas.

² The underlying spirit of National Blue Ocean Strategy and *Merakyatkan Perkhidmatan Awam* (Humanising the Public Service).

³ Literally means “this is where the love is found”. Originally a song entitled *Warisan* (Heritage) by Sudirman Haji Arshad.

⁴ http://www2.rsog.com.my/index.php?lang=en&_m=content&cid=1662

positively embraced. This eventually shaped the households⁵ of *rumah kita*.

Thirdly, leaders are also confronted with the call for openness. Such a quality can help to bring about trust and intimacy. Unlike before, technology often bypasses hierarchy, which is a huge challenge to the exclusivity of information that leaders are used to having. It is interesting to observe that even the royal households are showing an exemplary gesture of openness through occasional press statements and utilisation of social media.

Attitude-wise, being *progressive* has a lot of plus points. Hang Tuah was observed⁶ to possess such attitude. In *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, Hang Tuah⁷ was claimed to have mastered 12 languages and displayed a strong penchant for continued education. Indeed, education has been Malaysia's priority since the early days of the nation.

Finally, a *pragmatic* mind-set is observed⁸ as a necessity to bring the nation forward given the dynamics of today's environment. History has shown that such a mind-set has contributed enormously to Malaysian policy responses in the past. Based on the foregoing, it appears that *rumah kita* has undergone considerable changes since it was founded 60 years ago

– be it from outlook, dynamism, composition, and surrounding. The writing on the wall is that these changes are likely to be multiplied in the future. Needless to say, the destruction of *rumah kita* is the last thing on everyone's mind. As reflected in an award-winning book⁹, losing a house can be severely traumatic. To ensure that *rumah kita* stands and shines for many more years to come, a clear and shared meaning is seemingly non-negotiable. It is easier said than done as such a journey could be painful, considering that opening-up can be an uncomfortable experience to some. To start with, one should have a progressive attitude and pragmatic mind-set.

In Razak School of Government, regular discourses are organised to gather as much input as possible; not only to feed policy responses but to inculcate a culture of openness and provide an avenue for fellow countrymen to get acquainted with each other, meaningfully. Executive education programmes are designed in such a way to promote deep reflection on contemporary issues and closely related to leadership. As profoundly pointed out by our National Laureate Usman Awang, "...*tapi, anakku, hidup senantiasa mengembara...*"¹⁰. God bless Malaysia – *Merdeka! Merdeka! Merdeka.*

⁵ Strategic industries are led domestically through takeover from foreigners thus result in the creation of technical and professional job opportunities.

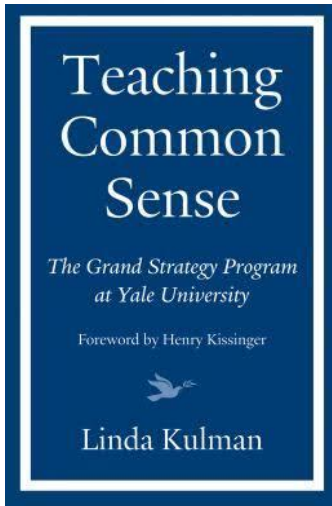
⁶http://www.rsog.com.my/index.php?lang=en&_m=content&cid=1598

⁷ A key figure in the 15th century Melaka Sultanate. In 2001, *Hikayat Hang Tuah* was registered into the UNESCO Memory of the World and to this day, remains a profound product of its age and its system of values.

⁸http://www.rsog.com.my/index.php?lang=en&_m=content&cid=1562

⁹ Desmond, Matthew. *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*. New York: BDWY Broadway, 2017. Print.

¹⁰ Literally means "but my son, life is a journey". Awang, Usman. *Duri dan Api, Sajak-Sajak Pilihan 1961 – 1966*. Petaling Jaya: Malayan Printers, 1966. Web.



Book Recommendation

By Ismail Johari Othman

Teaching Common Sense: The Grand Strategy Program at Yale University

Writer: *Linda Kulman*

One of the more popular English words, especially in places exposed to the British system, is *common*: Commonwealth, common law, and house of commons are some of the examples. Like government, *gomen* in colloquial Bahasa Malaysia, the word *common* has its own version, namely *koman*. Despite its favourable connotation, a famous writer profoundly pointed out, "*common sense is not so common*". Last year, Prospecta Press published a book that focuses on a year-long, admission-by-invitation only leadership-related programme called the Grand Strategy Program, which was established in year 2000 by Professors John Lewis Gaddis, Paul M. Kennedy, and Charles Hill of the prestigious Yale University. The professors define common sense as "*sound and practical judgment in everyday matters*". It appears that, like oxygen, common sense gets thinner the

higher one climbs. As such, it is imperative to equip the younger generation with a solid foundation as far as common sense is concerned.

This four-part book started with a general idea about the programme that gives considerable emphasis on critical thinking, creativity, effective communication (verbal and written), and work in an interdisciplinary team. Whilst the delivery of this programme may sound a bit vocational, the professors believe that the intellectual content is rooted on great liberal arts education. Students, comprising of undergraduates, postgraduates, and even practitioners, are exposed to masterpieces of over two and half millennia such as Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, Thucydides's *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, Machiavelli's *The Prince*, Kant's *Political Writings*, and Jay's *The Federalist*.

Interestingly, the idea of such a grand programme came about over lunch. The professors were concerned with their students who appeared to look at merely the '*corners of problems*'. Given the fact that many of them are likely to assume decision making roles in the future, such a trend is certainly a concern. The diversity that the professors have in terms of their background put them at the right starting point for the programme. Thereafter, they rigorously refined and experimented with their idea. The 9/11 attack in 2011 was somewhat a blessing in disguise to the growth of the programme. Together with the students, they created a talk series called Democracy, Security, and Justice: Perspectives on the American Future. This interdisciplinary discourse helped shape a sense of hope and purpose, especially among the students.

The third part of the book illustrates the underlying wish that this programme has on its students going forward, using the analogy of growing cherry trees instead of the more popular cherry picking approach. The rationale is that cherry trees grow from a seed, a small sprout, a trunk, leaves, and then fruit. It is effectively about logical sequence that is often derived from clarity and brevity which could be trained through reading, understanding, and reflecting on the earlier mentioned masterpieces.

The last part of this book comprises of four mini cases to offer some vivid imagination to the programme as well as adding vigour to discussions in the earlier parts. After all, this book is about grand strategy – ideally it ends grandiosely. The cases relating to the students' summer project and presidential briefs (simulation) are appealing. The projects seem wide ranging from the influence of China in Africa to the Venezuelan and Cuban connection. Whilst submission of essays is the end in mind, prior work on the ground is mostly the highlight of the project. Some of the students interviewed the Vatican to source for information. The emphasis for time by the professors during the simulation is worth noting – the words "*the world does not stand still while you are preparing*" are always drummed into the student's ears.

Like any other programme, there is always concern about continuity. Eventually, the day will come when professors retire. To that effect, a public health scholar was brought on board in 2016 as part of the programme's succession planning. Among her earlier moves was to define grand strategy as "*the study of the achievements of large end in the limited means*". It sounds a mouthful, but perhaps sensible as far as common sense is concerned.

This book is highly recommended to aspiring and evolving leaders looking to explore alternative approaches to leadership development. This book could also be useful to decision makers as a

guidance and reminder on the importance of common sense despite the advancements and sophistications invented to-date.

Teaching Common Sense: The Grand Strategy Program at Yale University is published by Prospecta Press and can be purchased from leading bookstores at RM126.53

RSOG INSIGHT aims to provide timely and, wherever possible, policy-relevant commentary on thoughts on RSOG Core themes – Federalism, Multiculturalism, and Development; and its research focus areas – Digital, Diversity, and Emotional Engagement.

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