

By Invitation

# Was Alexander the Great also known as Iskandar Zulkarnain?

A Malay renaissance is taking place on Singapore's doorstep and there is much to discover about the culture's links to other great civilisations.



**Kishore Mahubani**

For *The Straits Times*

The election of Madam Halimah Yacob as the eighth President of Singapore offers all non-Malay Singapore citizens a unique learning moment. All of us need to ask ourselves a simple question: How much do we know about Malay culture and customs? The answer to this question may not be easy.

Given my history and background, the answer from me, in theory, is that I know a lot. In practice, the answer may be the opposite. Please let me explain.

From the age of six months to about 25 years, I lived at 179 Onan Road, a small rent-controlled property. Both our neighbours were Malay families. In 177, there lived the Marican family and in 181 lived the Haniffa family. Both families had many children. Hence, I grew up playing with Malay kids,

eating in Malay kitchens, watching circumcisions, participating in Malay weddings and speaking Malay every day. Several decades have passed since I left Onan Road. I am still in touch with these families, from time to time.

At the age of 27, I was posted to Kuala Lumpur as the deputy chief of mission of the Singapore High Commission. I lived in this Malay society for three years. To communicate better, I sat and passed the Standard II Civil Service Malay examination. Of course, my key professional assignment was to understand the Malay mind and how it viewed the world.

I had the chance to visit many Malay homes, especially on Hari Raya, and developed close friendships with senior Malay officials in the Malaysian Foreign Ministry, in particular with two permanent secretaries, Tan Sri Kamil Jaafar and Tan Sri Halim Ali. Indeed, I attended a family wedding at the invitation of Tan Sri Halim Ali, celebrating the occasion with his family in a beautiful village surrounded by paddy fields in Kedah.

With almost three decades of close contact with Malay friends and families, I should easily have qualified as a Singaporean who knows Malay culture.

Yet, when I went to visit the

brilliant exhibition entitled *Tales Of The Malay World: Manuscripts And Early Books* at the National Library of Singapore, I was astonished to discover how ignorant I was. Here are a few examples of my ignorance.

As an amateur student of history, I know that the armies of Alexander the Great had reached Asia in 334BC. Indeed, the furthestmost point he came to was probably in the north-west region of the Indian sub-continent, possibly touching Sind, where my ancestral roots come from. Indeed, when our first son was born with green eyes in a New York hospital, I jokingly told my wife, Anne (whose father is Irish American), that the green eyes came from my side of the family, since Alexander the Great had left his genes in Sind.

Yet, despite this knowledge, I had no idea that Alexander the Great had penetrated Malay consciousness even though he never came to South-east Asia. The Malay world had numerous romanticised stories of Alexander the Great, in which he was known as Iskandar Zulkarnain. His task was to conquer the world and propagate the faith of Ibrahim, which was the forerunner of Islam. Various Malay sultans even claimed to be his descendants.

#### MALAY MAHARAJAHS

Again, as an amateur student of history, I knew that a lot of Hindu folklore had penetrated the Malay world. The spread of shadow play theatre, featuring both the Hindu epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata, over all corners of the Malay world demonstrated the long and deep engagement of the Malay world with the Indian sub-continent. The arrival of Islam meant that many traces of the Hindu influence began to recede. However, the struggle between the two narratives goes back centuries.

At the exhibition, I learnt that as far back as the 17th century, an Islamic theologian named Nuruddin al-Raniri warned against reading literature inspired by Hindu mythology, saying that they were "obvious in their lies". Yet, even though the traces of this Hindu narrative began to recede, they did not completely vanish.

Many of these traces are alive and well in the court rituals of many

royal Malay households. For example, the term "Raja" comes from a Sanskrit word, not an Arabic one. The first eight rulers of Kedah were styled maharajah.

According to James W. Gould, a history and international relations professor, "Indian influence upon politics in the archipelago was especially marked because the Malaysian rulers had turned to Hinduism for sanctification. Thus, the Malay concept of the ruler and the state are still basically Hindu."

"The higher structure of politics reflects Indian organisation, particularly in the adoption of Indian titles for such positions as commander-in-chief, minister of internal security, admiral, harbourmaster and ministers. Malay law also reveals Hindu influences; the similarity of Malay punishments to those in the Indian code of Manu is striking."

Early Malay literature was inspired and influenced by Indian epics, such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Malay folklore also includes characters from these epics, such as the Garuda and the Naga. The close integration of many aspects of Indian culture into Malay customs and culture means that those who look for a sharp differentiation between Indian and Malay identities will not find one.

Equally importantly, the Islam that arrived in South-east Asia was brought by peaceful Indian merchants, not Arab warriors. Sociologist and author Patrick Pillai notes that "the greatest legacy of the Indian Muslims is their introduction of Islam to the peninsula. Greater geographical proximity, numbers and inter-marriage meant that South



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Indian Muslims had a greater impact in Islamising Malay courts compared to Arab, Gujerati and Chinese Muslims".

Hence, even in the Islamic customs of South-east Asia, we can find various traces of Indian influence. For example, Sanskrit terms such as agama (for religion), puasa (for fasting), neraka (for hell) and syurga (for heaven) tend to be used instead of their Arabic counterparts.

#### MALAY RENAISSANCE

Given this long and complex history of Malay culture and customs, I would strongly encourage non-Malay Singapore citizens to visit the brilliant exhibition at the National Library.

When my wife and I went to visit it on Sept 10, after reading political scientist and historian Farish Noor's insightful column about it

(*Manuscripts of South-east Asia's global past*, ST, Sept 5), I was dismayed to see so few people there. Most of these few people seemed to be tourists, not Singaporeans.

I was truly impressed by the queues of Singaporeans who waited hours to catch a glimpse of famed Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama's beautiful exhibition at the National Gallery. Indeed, I visited it with my fellow members of the Lee Kuan Yew World City Prize Nominating Committee. All of us were dazzled by her art.

Similarly, we should also see queues of Singaporeans at the exhibitions of Malay culture.

Let me conclude with a bold prediction. The influence and impact of Malay culture on the world will continue to grow steadily as the economies of Indonesia and Malaysia continue to grow steadily.

Singapore will be surrounded by this Malay cultural renaissance. The better we understand it today, the better we will understand the cultural environment of the region in which our children and grandchildren will grow up. Let's take the occasion of Madam Halimah's election to deepen our understanding of Malay culture.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• The writer is dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore and co-author with Jeffery Sng of *The Asean Miracle: A Catalyst For Peace*.

• The exhibition *Tales Of The Malay World: Manuscripts And Early Books* at the National Library is on till Feb 25, 2018. Admission is free.