

RSOG Leadership Forum

Datuk Lat: Being Malaysia

with

YBhg. Datuk Mohammad Nor Khalid

- When** : 5 August 2015
Where : Razak School of Government
Speakers : YBhg. Datuk Mohammad Nor Khalid

About the Leadership Forum

Is Datuk Lat anything like his cartoons? This Leadership Forum is to explore Datuk Lat's own philosophy of being Malaysian as we grapple many challenges within our society. As a keen observer of our society and culture, Datuk Lat remembers well the time where racial harmony, national pride, value of friendship, humility and kindness dominates the society. Although Malaysia has rapidly changed since then, Datuk Lat's cartoons still endures as the epitome of Malaysian customs and tradition, locally and abroad. However, with the technological impasse of current time, it is easy to get disconnected from the society and tradition at large. As a result, many Malaysians lack the awareness of their own heritage that has made us unique in the eyes of the world. In this seminar, Datuk Lat shared his experience as a cartoonist and an anthropologist in observing the Malaysian identity towards a developed nation. Reviving our strong ethnic unity, friendship, critique on today's society, and living the "Kampung Boy" way are some of the examples which Datuk Lat shared.

Summary

When one is acquainted, and eventually immersed, with "*The Kampung Boy*" series, a surge of emotions can awash oneself. It can be of nostalgia, especially if one is brought up in a similar setting as the young boy portrayed; or of intrigue, if the narrative described in the adventure series is foreign to oneself. Nevertheless, Malaysians will always, in one way or another, identify with the graphic novel – based on personal experience or based on oral history countlessly retold by the earlier generation who grew up in the 50s. In the Leadership Forum with YBhg. Datuk Mohammad Nor Khalid, the cartoonist himself shared his views, values, and his infectious laugh before an

audience that comprise of mainly public sector leaders and private sector representatives.

He started by correcting a commonly misunderstood fact that he is a thoroughbred "*Kampung Boy*". Whilst he was born in a village, he did not grow up in specific one. He moved to many places as his father, an instrumental figure in nudging his interest in sketching, was in the army (initially as a clerk). He recounted memories of his father bringing home rolls of paper, knowing that he loved to draw. This artistic tendency grew and flourished further with support and encouragement from family members, neighbours, friends, and even anyone who found out that he could draw.

Everybody remembers their first pay check. Datuk Lat first received his when he was 13 years of age, a cheque of RM25, no less, for his first published comic entitled "*Tiga Sekawan Menangkap Pencuri*". As what most Malaysians would do with their first pay, a sum is given to the parent (although he did request for some of the amount back, cue an endless jibe of being '*buruk siku*[1]' by his late mother). The remaining was spent to treat his younger brother a nice bowl of *ais kacang*[2], played a few songs on a jukebox, and purchased a Beatles single – to kick-start his many Beatles records and collectibles. As the story of his childhood is retold, one can't help but imagining it in the form of his drawings.

The inspiration to bring "*Kampung Boy*" into art-form came when he took the train from Kuala Lumpur to Ipoh. Throughout the journey, he saw *kampung* houses on stilts and children running around unclothed, cheerfully showing "peace signs" to the passing train. He decided that more people need to know their existence. The series ran on a simple and basic premise of telling people about what happened in *kampung* life, the sort of games that was played, and the sort of people who grew up in the village. He did not stop at sharing stories of growing up in a *kampung*, instead he ventured further by summarising the Malaysian social and current affairs in a panel or so of cartoons. His ability to condense an issue into that is simply based on a rule that he always followed since he started drawing, which was not to draw anything that would be hurtful to anyone or upset his mother. This simple, yet profound approach did not prevent him from addressing issues that may be deemed as sensitive as it is treated with utmost respect and care.

This was further exemplified when an audience inquired why there was a revision in one of the series – a scene where the father slapped across his son's face over stolen ore was no longer in the newer publication. He pointed out that this stems from the common belief that the cartoon is purely autobiographical and the readers started to believe that his father slapped him over an incident that actually happened to someone else. He felt that it was wrong to mislead the public and unfair to his father. Therefore he redrew certain pages and edited certain stories to balance between factual accuracy and depiction of life during that era.

Datuk Lat embraces the saying that "change is the only constant". In the 60s, the youngsters are waving goodbye to P. Ramlee and R. Azmi and saying hello to influx of

Western musical influences of Elvis Presley, The Beatles, and Cliff Richard. There will always be newer trends for the new generation to follow. He realises that methods utilised in the past may not be usable now. We can only continue to be nostalgic of the days gone by but there is a need to accept that times are always changing and allow the young ones to experience life as what was afforded to us in the past. As the saying by the Islamic Caliphate Saidina Ali ibn Abi Talib R.A., *“Do not raise your children the way your parents raised you, they were born for a different time.”*

With a tinge of nostalgia and sense of patriotism, he put on record of how thankful he is of the good response received from everyone and felt blessed of the opportunity to contribute to the country through his talent. Without a doubt, it is Malaysians who are fortunate to have Datuk Lat as our fellow countrymen.

“Rejabhad had a workshop for young cartoonist once. As an ex-army man, he was a strict man who gave orders and regulations – don’t do this, don’t do that. He strongly said no nudity in the cartoons. A student asked, “How come Lat does it?” I think he said, “Lat tak apa.”

Issued raised

[1] Literally bad elbow, Which is a Malay proverb for asking the recipient to return what was previously given.

[2] A Malaysian dessert of shaved ice and various toppings such as red beans, corn, and palm sugar syrup.

Originality matters in a world of competing ideas. Osman Baru, Alias Kulup, Rejabhad, and Haji Sulaiman Awang were all great cartoonist who drew in Malay and Datuk Lat realised he could not compete with them. He decided then to draw in English.

Presently, there are various medium to spread art. It used to be newspaper and magazines, and then animation started to come to the fore. Now mobile content have gained traction. Regardless of the medium, ensuring audience’s attention is captured and retained remains the biggest task. Art needs to be meaningful and suitable for the public as they are the ones who ensures its endurance.

Personal views on a subject matter and a steady moral compass is important in capturing issues or current affairs. Suggestions and ideas can come from many people and certain situations observed can be a source of inspiration. However, in the end, one must do what fits with one’s thinking, principles, and belief system.

About the Speaker

Datuk Mohammed Nor Khalid, commonly known as Datuk Lat, was born in March 1951 in Perak. A Malaysian cartoonist, social commentator, and cultural icon, Datuk Lat was raised in a close-knit kampong or village community. His cartoons have become a vital part of

Malaysian life. Datuk Lat is among the best known and best loved cultural personality in the country, admired by old and young alike. His phenomenal popularity and acceptance by the Malaysian public may be explained by the fact that people of all races in this country can readily identify with his positive messages and values, which are spiced with humour.

Contact

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