

The candi crush saga

“UNFORTUNATELY, in a society obsessed with ‘development and progress’, we have to be vigilant or we may easily lose the intrinsic values and evidence of the wealth of our culture and heritage in spite of the existence of various legal provisions.”

So said architect Datuk Hajeedar Abdul Majid at the launch of the Malaysian (and 101st) committee of the International Council of Monuments and Sites (Icomos), of which he is the first chairman, on Tuesday. Icomos is a global non-governmental organisation that works for the conservation and protection of cultural heritage places, founded as a result of the 1964 Venice Charter that provided a code of professional standards for the preservation and restoration of ancient buildings. Since 1972, it has been one of the formal advisory bodies to the World Heritage Committee under the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco).

It is a timely development given recent agitation about the fate of our historical sites, in particular candi number 11 in the Bujang Valley in Kedah. Its ‘accidental’ destruction a week ago sparked commentary with the usual diversity of opinion that we are now used to when events of national significance occur. On the low side of the intellectual spectrum were those who saw the possible gazetting of sites only in terms of its potential electoral impact. On the academic side were erudite scholars who contextualised the incident as just another symptom of a society where history and heritage are not sufficiently valued.

Weaving through the two extremes was an ethnic dimension (obviously), and what this means for us as Malaysians today. Of course there were those who would only be interested in such sites if they were made by their own kind, but there were interesting disagreements about how to define ‘their own kind’. Thus, while some were bogged down by questions about whether the candi builders were ethnic Malays, or merely pre-Islamic forebears, more inclusive Malaysians understood a fundamental point that unfortunately is alien to ethnic exclusivists today: that there is a history that belongs to all of us.

No doubt, as individuals we may feel a particularly strong emotional connection to those civilisations with which we have a blood connection; and no doubt, some families may have stories that are meant only to be passed on within the family. But that does not contradict the fact that every indigenous civilisation, and indeed every migrant community, has contributed to making Malaysia what it is today. If we were honest, we would also acknowledge the influence of Anglo-Saxon political history within our institutions.

And so, to some extent, even if we have no biological connection to anyone who ever lived in Kedah, we are nonetheless descendants and custodians of the civilisation that once existed in the Bujang Valley. It may be more difficult to trace the lineage, since it was so much longer ago, and no one today practises an adat that explicitly claims continuity from that civilisation, but that does not mean it is not important.

Indeed, it is meaningful that Datuk Hajeedar put ‘development and progress’ in quote marks, because a truly developed and progressive society would understand the value of its tangible and intangible history. In such a society, there would be tremendous public pressure applied to government and developers to preserve our heritage buildings.

Thankfully, there have always been champions in our universities and some government institutions to make this a reality. It is to these scientists and historians that we should thank for the progress made so far, in particular the recognition by Unesco of our four world heritage sites: the Archaeological Heritage of the Lenggong Valley in Perak, Melaka and George Town as Historic Cities of the Straits of Malacca, Gunung Mulu National Park in Sarawak and Kinabalu Park in Sabah. Unfortunately, these same academics are not in control over what young Malaysians are taught in schools. It is a truly regrettable case of disjointed policy that while much effort is made to fight for our heritage sites internationally, Malaysian schoolchildren living near the sites might never be told about profound local histories. (It's for this reason that I'm so supportive of including schoolchildren at on-site commemorations of major battles: not only can they witness the emotions of veterans but they can get a history lesson as well.)

As a result of the 'candi crush' there is also confusion about the separation of responsibilities between federal and state governments.

Apparently, while gazetting is done by a federal authority, subsequent responsibility to protect sites lies with states. Obviously this can have cost implications and I wonder whether it would be easier to decentralise the whole process, especially given that land is primarily a state matter.

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