

TEXT OF A TALK, "DEVELOPING A NATIONAL CULTURE IN SINGAPORE" BY TUAN HAJI SHA'ARI TADIN, SR PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY (CULTURE) AT THE TRAINEES' LOUNGE OF THE NATIONAL YOUTH LEADERSHIP TRAINING INSTITUTE AT SOUTH BUONA VISTA ROAD ON WEDNESDAY, 9.7.75, AT 8.00 PM

A national culture may be evolved through either one of two distinct processes. It may be achieved through a process of cultural assimilation or through a longer process that involves cultural democracy. Let me forthwith explain what I mean by the two concepts of cultural assimilation and cultural democracy.

Cultural assimilation often takes place in an environment containing two or more cultures of different relative strengths. Assimilation involves the absorption of the minority culture by the majority or stronger culture. Cultural assimilation may be a natural process as in the case of the assimilation of the Negroes into the white American culture. On the other hand, and particularly in developing countries, the process of cultural assimilation is often initiated by governments. A good example of cultural assimilation initiated by the government is in the case of Indonesia where the cultures of the ethnic minorities have been displaced through their assimilation into the Malay-based Indonesian cultural stream. Cultural assimilation, therefore often involves the displacement of minority cultures. Its keynote is often an emphasis on a national language as opposed to a multi-lingual policy. In addition, the majority culture receives favoured treatment.

The diametric opposite of a process of cultural assimilation is cultural democracy where all cultures co-exist in harmony and equality with each other. Under conditions of cultural democracy, a national culture will be achieved through the harmonious evolution of the various ethnic cultures. The resultant national culture will contain a facet of the various ethnic cultures modified to suit the times. In contrast to the process of cultural assimilation the national culture that emerges from a culturally democratic framework will have less in common with its major component ethnic culture. There will still be a certain degree of cultural displacement although whole cultures of minority groups will not be totally displaced. What is displaced will be those aspects of ethnic culture not reconcilable with the goals of nation-building or with the central philosophy of the nation. For example in a scientific and technologically oriented society, it would be irrelevant and even harmful to perpetuate those aspects of culture that are mystical and introverted.

It will, therefore, be obvious that when one speaks of cultural democracy it is not absolute democracy that is envisaged. In the area of culture no less than in the area of government absolute democracy must be viewed as an unattainable ideal. Democracy in the area of culture will be limited by national goals and aspirations as well as by the moral temper of the society. However, despite these limitations, one can still claim to be culturally democratic as these limitations are imposed equally on all ethnic cultures.

What are the means that Singapore employs towards the attainment of a national culture? My question assumes of course, that our cultural policy is directed towards the evolution of a national culture. The assumption is inevitable in the context of any developing nation, for the development of a national culture is one of the necessary goals of nation-building. The term "culture" has been variously defined but a fairly comprehensive definition would equate the term "culture" with the total accumulation of material objects, ideas, symbols, values, sentiments and beliefs, social, political and economic forms that are passed on from one generation to another. When one speaks of a national culture in a multi-ethnic context one has in mind the ultimate integration of multiple beliefs, symbols, values and social, political and economic forms. This is precisely the end of nation-building. That is why it is contradictory to speak of nation-building without the development of a national culture as one of its goals.

In the pursuit of a national culture, our avowed policy is one of cultural democracy. We have a situation where all cultures enjoy equal rights and opportunities. Bilingualism and even trilingualism are insisted upon in contrast to an emphasis on a single national language which is the rule in societies that seek to assimilate the weaker cultures. It is expected that a national culture will finally evolve as the inevitable culmination of a long period of communal co-existence.

The direction and the limitations that will be imposed on communal cultures will depend on the sort of values that we want in our Republic. Succinctly, we are striving towards a society that is scientific, industrialised and urbanised. It will be non-communal and non-racial although communal and racial elements will be cohesively integrated into the national culture. Those elements of communal cultures that are mystical and introverted and therefore alien to the scientific spirit will be rejected. Also unacceptable to us will be those erratic

sub-cultures of the West that are harmful to the work ethic which is central to our national outlook. Nor will hippie culture and its attendant laxness be allowed to have a stranglehold on Singapore.

Due to its location, Singapore is accessible to various sorts of cultural influences. Hence, vigilant care is necessary to ensure that harmful aspects of foreign culture do not infiltrate into our indigenous culture. However, there are also certain advantages accruing from Singapore's position. It is the meeting point of East and West and in all likelihood, an interesting blend of Eastern and Western culture may emerge in Singapore.

Already we can see in an elementary form the merger of cultures that is taking place in Singapore. The consequences of cultural intermingling have produced far-reaching results. For example, there are many Chinese, apart from Babas, who have imbibed Malay cultural elements by wearing the sarong and eating with their fingers. The most pronounced Malay influence on the Chinese is typified by the Babas who speak a Malay dialect and even employ it in their prayer, folklore and literature. Their music, food, costumes and manners also show strong traces of Malay influence. On the other hand, Malays and Indians have employed the 'ang-pow' as a goodwill gift.

The introduction of modern media such as the TV and the radio for entertainment and mass information have even more dramatic cultural consequences. They have played a significant part in the cross-fertilization of cultures. Since June 1973, a series of programmes on Malay and Indian dances, musical instruments and paintings, have been presented in Chinese on TV. Chinese stories have also been featured in Tamil and other languages. In the radio programmes, songs from the different language/cultural streams, woven around specific themes, are also presented. Very often, concert programmes including cultural items representative of the four language streams are presented over both radio and TV. All this contribute to a greater awareness and appreciation of the rich diversity existent among Singaporeans.

Linguistic integration is also manifested in the modifications that is taking place in the four languages in Singapore. It is possible now to speak of Singapore English in reference to a version of the English language that is distinctive of Singapore. The Malay language too is being enriched by the coinage of words that have their origin in the English language.

However, the integration that we have so far achieved is not sufficient to lay claim to a national culture. It is possible now to distinguish a Malay performance from a Chinese or Indian performance. We have to strive for the time when a performance would be distinctively Singaporean with strong Malay, Indian and Chinese influence.

What are the positive steps that we have taken towards the evolution of a national culture in Singapore? They may be summarised as involving the following two processes. Firstly, orientation of the nation to relevant values and goals for a scientific industrialised and urbanised economy. Secondly, the preservation^{and development} of indigenous culture within the framework of a technologically oriented economy.

The first process of orientating the nation to relevant values and goals is achieved through the mass media, education and careful planning. The values which are relevant are those which will hasten and ensure Singapore's continued economic development. Hence, besides such values as hardwork, discipline, thrift and high productivity, we, in cognisance of Singapore's limited resources and size, insist also on a two-child family and a wage-productivity balance. These are some of the more important values that our politicians and community leaders have been stressing to our people for some time. However, these values are best instilled through our education system. Our teachers therefore have a very important role to play in this regard. They are not only expected to teach and pass the knowledge from the text books to the students but should also emphasise these values that are relevant to Singapore. The mass media through its reportage of Government leaders' speeches and releases also orientate the people to the new goals and values contained in the speeches and releases.

As mentioned earlier, the lack of resources in Singapore makes it important and essential that we plan carefully the training of our people to meet the needs of the nation. Our people are now aware that to cater for the expanding industries and their higher technological requirements, greater emphasis need to be placed on Science and Engineering subjects.

The second step in our cultural formation is concretely manifested in the cultural programmes organised and encouraged by the Ministry of Culture. These include its popular "Music for Everyone",

and "Concerts for the Young" series. In addition under the auspices of the Ministry, art exhibitions and photographic exhibitions are held frequently. The Ministry also has a National Dance Company which has performed abroad and has won acclaim. (Please refer to Annex 'A' for more details).

Radio and Television Singapore are also used as a media for the arts to be introduced nation-wide to the public. Besides RTS, the National Theatre, the People's Association and the Ministry of Education contribute towards the propagation of culture in the Republic. The National Theatre actively promotes local and foreign cultural shows. On the other hand, the People's Association organises and promotes mass participation in cultural and social activities through its network of 187 community centres.

The Ministry of Education propagates culture primarily through the schools. It encourages aesthetic education and appreciation through music and art lessons in schools. Through activities such as the Youth Festival, which incorporates mass displays, march pasts of uniformed groups and music and dance presentations, young people are encouraged to express and to create as a step towards the better appreciation of the finer things in life.

The first phase of the development towards a national culture is what is taking place now - namely the preservation and development of communal cultures. However, one can claim to have achieved a national culture only when the four communal cultures have achieved a degree of integration. This will be a long-term process particularly in a culturally democratic framework.

The process of cultural integration cannot be forcibly initiated by the Government. This is because culture is a self-evolving factor and consists of the sum total of the life of a community. Extraneously imposed cultures are therefore doomed to be short-lived. Furthermore, threats to individual communal cultures will provoke the most violent resistance from within. Our approach to cultural integration is based on the willingness of the dominant groups in Singapore to permit cultural variability within the range consonant with national unity and security. Any imagined threat to ethnic cultures from the Government will destroy the spontaneous willingness of the dominant group to co-exist and create in its place inter-ethnic tension.

The process of developing a national culture is inevitably long. It will be apparent that those nations with strong national cultures are those with long histories as well. The British culture is the result of an evolution of Saxon, Scandinavian and Norman culture. The evolution was a process that lasted over many centuries. Even the countries with recent histories such as the USA, which has recently celebrated its 200th Independence Day, it required at least two centuries to develop a distinctive American culture.

Therefore, it is quite logical to assume that it may take another century or so before a distinctive Singapore culture is developed. Singapore has had a comparatively short history. It came into existence as an entity only in 1819. Its history as a sovereign power is even shorter. It would therefore be most unrealistic to expect a national culture in Singapore after only 10 years of existence as a sovereign power.

The evolution of a national culture can best be accelerated through the activities of private cultural groups. Such groups should be willing to move away from aims that are directed towards the fossilization of their respective cultures. There is a great danger of preserving ethnic culture to the point of being fossilized. Communal cultures are removed from the environment that nurtured them and therefore forcibly alienated from the mainstream of development that is taking place in the country of origin. Unless communal cultures identify themselves with the new environment and its developments they will degenerate into sterile representations of an irrelevant past and finally vanish altogether.

The key word in the cultural context is not "preservation" but "development". By virtue of our culturally democratic framework the Government cannot intervene very much or make aggressive incursions into ethnic cultures in the pursuit of a national culture. It can only serve as a catalyst for cultural development by creating the correct environment. The initiative must largely come from within each ethnic community.

One of the measures that the Government has undertaken to hasten the process of forging a national culture is its insistence on bilingualism. Bilingualism, it is hoped, will contribute eventually towards the development of a common Singapore identity.

It is hoped that besides forging a common consciousness bilingualism will also strengthen us culturally. It will enable us to draw upon symbols from our individual cultural traditions and literature to create new works of art. The influence of Greek art and literature on the development of English literature is a parallel of what we hope to achieve in Singapore by drawing upon our cultural past.

Given the current trend of development and provided that disruptive factors do not intervene a national culture will eventually emerge in Singapore. It will be a long-term process and the final strength and character of our national culture will be evident from the fine arts that will be part of our national culture.

ACTIVITIES OF THE MINISTRY OF CULTUREArt for Everyone Exhibitions

The first such exhibition was held on 28.5.71. It was the idea of the Minister for Culture, Mr Jek Yeun Thong. The exhibition is viewed as an opportunity for young, up and coming artists to exhibit and sell their works. They also provide art lovers with an opportunity to enjoy local works of art and to acquire them.

To date a total of 1040 paintings by 163 artists have been exhibited in 29 different community centres.

The prices of the works of art are reasonable and range from \$50 to \$300. About 200 paintings have been sold under this series of exhibition.

Music for Everyone

The idea of a "Music for Everyone" series was first mooted by the Minister for Culture as one of the means of 'raising the standard of appreciation of the fine arts in Singapore'.

The first concert was launched on 7.11.71. Since then 49 concerts have been held.

The concerts are held at fortnightly or monthly intervals and are priced at a flat rate of \$1/-.

Concerts for the Young

The first concert was held on 19.1.74 at the National Library Lecture Theatre. To-date 18 concerts have been held in this series. It is held on the 1st Saturday of each month. Certificates of participation are awarded to performers.

Open-air Art Exhibitions for the Young

The first open-air art exhibition was held at the Esplanade on 17.2.74. Since then 4 such exhibitions have been held at the Botanic Gardens and the National Theatre grounds. Each exhibition is participated by an average of 140 young artists. An average of 400 art works are exhibited each time.

The exhibition is divided into the following sections:- Kindergarten, Primary School and Secondary School. Certificates of Merit are awarded to outstanding entries.

National Day Art Exhibition

The National Day Art Exhibition was first held in 1969 in conjunction with the 150th Anniversary of Singapore. About an average of 300 art works by 130 artists are exhibited at each National Day.

Certificates of Merit are awarded to outstanding entries.

National Day Photo Exhibition

The National Day Photo Exhibition was first held in 1973. The average number of photo exhibits at each exhibition is 300. The average number of participants each year is 80. Certificates of Merit are awarded each year to outstanding photographs.