

The salute that said it all

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Our leaders had constantly re-examined and refined their ideas that accompanied the journey to independence. The shifts in approach reflected the passage of time and brought people of different races together, writes PRABHAKARAN S. NAIR



THE process of adjustment to the realities of the times was reflected in the change of Umno's slogan from *Hidup Melayu* (Long Live the Malays) to *Merdeka* (Independence).

This change signalled the broadening of nationalism to include all races in Malaya.

In the early years, Umno founder Datuk Onn Ja'afar had articulated only Malay interest, but soon realised this approach would lead him nowhere close to independence.

Sir Gerald Templar, the High Commissioner of Malaya, had made it clear that the British government owed it to the non-Malays, to see to their well-being.

This was also the position of Lyttelton, the Colonial Secretary.

So when the proposal to open Umno's door to the other races was not accepted, Onn left the party. He hoped that the new non-communal party he founded would be acceptable to the British and all races.

In the meantime, Tunku Abdul Rahman, who took over from Onn as Umno president in 1951, realised the importance of winning the non-Malays over.



cultural relic.

In a speech on Aug 30, 1957, Tunku said: "With independence let all people who consider Malaya their home cultivate the spirit of goodwill, peace and happiness towards one another.

"Let all the keris and weapons be articles of adornment, for we stand for peace and goodwill and we will work towards this end."

Both these gestures gave way to the open hand salute that was seen for the first time at the Selangor Club padang at midnight on Aug 30, 1957.

Moments earlier, Umno Youth leader Sardon Jubir had presented Tunku with a "gift from the people of Malaya", a gold chain and locket with "Bapa Kemerdekaan" (Father of Independence) inscribed on it.

The crowd then shouted "Bapa Kemerdekaan" three times. Tunku responded with an open hand salute for the first time.

"From now on, it will be an open hand salute," announced Tunku.

Confrontation to conciliation

The confrontational approach towards the British in the early years of Umno gave way to a conciliatory attitude.

The beginnings of Umno was associated with agitation and demonstrations against the Malayan Union.

In time, the strident stance mellowed into a milder form of nationalism that stressed "gradualism and co-operation with the British".

The excellent relationship that evolved over time may be held up as a model of diplomacy. This was due in no small measure to having to confront a common enemy — communism.

The Alliance was formed, under the presidency of Tunku, rendering the call of *Hidup Melayu* irrelevant.

"When I was the president of Umno only, I had only the Malays to consider and reckon with. Then when I became leader of the Alliance, I had the Chinese, Indians and all other Malayans to consider," said Tunku.

After his 1955 election victory, Tunku said that the narrow nationalism of the past had given way to a more inclusive nationalism.

He continued that "in the course of the last few years (the original concept of) nationalism had broadened, and had won into its fold not only the Malays but also the Chinese, Indians and others who looked upon this country as their home".

It is generally assumed that it was Tunku who changed the slogan from *Hidup Melayu* to *Merdeka*.

In an interview in 2001, Tun Omar Ong Yoke Lin, the last surviving member of Tunku's Cabinet, is reported to have said that "the Tunku really knew what the people wanted then, because once at the helm, he changed the party slogan".

Umno records show that the slogan was adopted in March 1951, whereas Tunku only took over the leadership of Umno in August 1951.

It is possible that Onn who had read the signs of the times correctly would have wanted a change in the last few

months of his Umno presidency.

It cannot be denied that it was Tunku who imbued the rallying call of *Merdeka* with new spirit and hope following the Umno-MCA electoral pact of 1952.

As Omar had said: "Merdeka was such a powerful force. It galvanised the people and transcended race".

Clenched fist to open hand salute

It is interesting to note that the gradual refinement of ideals and broadening of outlook was reflected in the changing styles of the hand salute that accompanied the rallying call of *Merdeka*.

MCS officer Veloo Saminathan recalls that "the clenched fist had been used by Umno since its early years as a gesture of defiance against the Malayan Union proposal".

It was at the proclamation of the date of independence in February 1956 that Tunku came up with the clenched fist as the *Merdeka* Salute.

At the same occasion, which took place at the Bandar Hilir padang in Malacca, a member of Kaum Ibu presented Tunku with a 100-year-old keris.

At that moment he spontaneously raised the keris with his left hand.

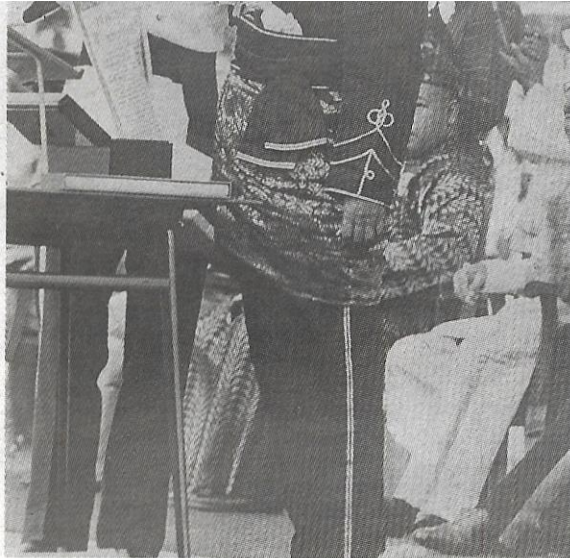
(Clockwise from top, left) From clenched fist, to raised keris, Tunku Abdul Rahman finally adopted the open hand salute. — Pictures courtesy of National Archives

Although it was not meant to be a *Merdeka* salute, images of this action captured the imagination of the people.

When the country celebrated 25 years of independence in 1982, Bank Negara issued three commemorative coins that depicted Tunku with the keris.

The left hand gesture was met with disbelief by some people who thought that the coin must have gone into mint with an error.

Numismatist Datuk Mohamad



Kassim said Tunku could have had a message for the people when he raised his left hand.

"The keris raised with the left hand may have signified the desire to achieve independence without shedding blood," said Mohamad.

"Holding the keris with the right hand could be construed as being ready to shed blood."

While recognising the significance of the keris in Malay culture, Tunku had emphasised that the weapon was merely to be considered as a

relationship was helped by the presence of affable personalities on both sides.

The ties were so close that Tunku once described the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Lord Alan Lennox-Boyd, as "the other *Bapa Kemerdekaan*".

Tunku had understood the futility of adopting a confrontational approach, when a friendlier approach would have yielded results.

"With the British it is no use going to them and saying, 'I demand, I demand, I demand.' You won't get what you want," said Tunku.

With this conciliatory approach Tunku succeeded in getting the British to fix the date of independence mid-way through their talks.

As we look back, we realise the distance we have travelled — from the first stirrings of a nascent nationalism to the attainment of *Merdeka*.

Our journey to freedom has been enriched by our gradual awakening to new concepts and ideas.

As we approach 50 years of independence, let us build on these ideals that have matured in the course of that journey, and transcend older modes of thinking that continue to keep us apart. — MPS.

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