

Put history back in expert hands

Following our package last week on what's being taught as history in the nation's schools, SHERIDAN MAHAVERA and SITI NURBAYAH NADZMI listen to what historians and teachers have to say

HERE'S a view of history that is sure to cause some anguish among certain quarters: this country's independence did not come when power and control of Malaysia was handed from the British administration to the people of Malaysia, but when power was handed from the rulers of the Malay states to the people of then Malaya.

This view of that totemic pass in national history is advanced by the doyen of Malaysian historians, Tan Sri Professor Dr Khoo Kay Kim — but it's not in the school textbooks.

It's just another example of how the textbooks are not written by experts like Khoo, while those hired to do so are deficient in their understanding of history (see interview on next page).

Those who decide the content of textbooks do not understand legal concepts such as *de facto* and *de jure*, Khoo says, and they have no grounding in the basics of the Constitution.

"The British often used the law and sometimes broke it when they wanted to interfere with the affairs of the nine Malay states, so one must know how the law works to teach about what went on.

"The agreements signed between the nine Malay rulers and the British never specified that sovereignty or *kedaulatan*



Half-a-century after Tunku Abdul Rahman proclaimed Merdeka in Kuala Lumpur on Aug 31, 1957, Malaysians still differ on how it happened and what it meant.

would be handed over to them. "So the sultans were always the *de jure* (in law) rulers of all their holdings," Khoo said in an interview with the *New Straits Times*.

Though the British advisers to the rulers had *de facto* (actual but not legal) power, the exercise of that power had to be done with the consent of the ruler.

The sultans, Khoo notes, were

absolute rulers who owned practically every inch of real estate in their spheres of influence, and theirs was the prerogative of granting permission to live on, extract riches from and develop these lands.

Understanding how "rule in law" worked when it came to the relationship among the Europeans, the royal courts, and the waves of immigrants who

made up the royal subjects is crucial when teaching school children about the various races that came to settle in Malaysia.

The narrative in textbooks of natives being dispossessed by foreigners brought in by a "colonial administration" does not hold water when one remembers that the rulers always had *de jure* power.

those who disagree to show me the proof.

"In fact, they tried to get the Malays, Chinese and Indians to integrate. It was the races who refused to do so."

Khoo laments that many textbook writers and history teachers these days have not even seen primary documents, such as the treaties signed between the British and Malay rulers.



The signing of the Federation of Malaya Agreement on Aug 5, 1957, was done by all nine Malay rulers and British High Commissioner to the Federation Sir Donald MacGillivray.

“For instance,” Khoo points out, “the assumption is that the Chinese were brought in by the British whose authority superseded that of the ruler. In fact, the Chinese were brought in by Chinese towkays with the permission of the ruler.”

Khoo does not have a problem with how history is revised in school texts to create a “Malaysianised” point of view, instead of the Eurocentric one that prevailed in the 1950s. “What is wrong is when you write and ignore historic facts,” he says.

“The problem now is that if something in the Eurocentric view was black, it automatically becomes white in the so-called Malaysianised view. You must have proof to back something up.”

Another example is how the textbooks say the British practised a “divide and rule policy”, which ensured the communities were segregated, to breed suspicion and hostility among the races.

“There was no such policy by the British, and I challenge

As last week’s NST report on history illustrated (“Whose story is our history?” — April 11), there is an underlying presumption throughout much of the textbooks that non-Malays are not as patriotic as Malays.

Professor Dr Mansor Mohd Noor of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia has been researching inter-ethnic relations for years. His findings suggest that this erroneous presumption is widespread in Malaysian society.

“The Chinese are usually blamed for not being patriotic, but in reality the feelings of patriotism among them are just as high as the Malays,” he says.

“Patriotism is not based on ethnicity.”

The teaching of history, Mansor says, must be inclusive and move beyond ethnic calculations and toxic assumptions, such as whether one community is more “patriotic” than another.

Most importantly, says Khoo, it must be put back in the hands of experts.