

Visit a museum today!

CONSERVATIVELY SPEAKING FREELY

By TUNKU 'ABIDIN MUHRIZ



Back in April last year, part of the old Istana Negara — comprising the Balairong Seri — was opened for the *Raja Kita* exhibition. I went to have a look, and agreed entirely with the concept: There is no better place for locals and tourists to immerse themselves in our institution of federal monarchy.

This week I was invited back to the former mansion of Chinese millionaire Chan Wing which became our head of state's official residence. The director-general of the Department of Museums Malaysia (which comes under the ambit of the Ministry of Information, Communication and Culture), Dato' Ibrahim Ismail, and his team very kindly showed me round another wing of the palace which has been opened for public viewing.

This included the smaller audience chambers, bedrooms and dining halls, and I think many visitors will be impressed by the tasteful presentation of the items and the general understated elegance of the furnishings.

Compared to some politicians' houses, it's in fact rather modest.

Some people might say that it is quite a contrast to its replacement, the new Istana Negara — which although was justified on the grounds that the old one was in a growingly inadequate location, had constrained facilities and was deteriorating (the heads of government and judiciary already had brand-spanking new official offices while the head of state had not) — like most Malaysians I believed that a perfectly adequate building could have been constructed at a lower cost.

The emphasis here is different compared to the various royal museums seen in the states, mainly because the federal institution only dates back to Merdeka, while the individual sultanates have histories dating back centuries (the oldest is Kedah which became a sultanate in 1136 (but add another millennium if you want to start with Merong Mahawangsa), and the newest is Perlis which became separate from Kedah in 1843).

So in the Royal Galleries in Klang, Kuala Kangsar or Seri Menanti, there are far more ancient artefacts and information on rituals. A fabulous academic summary of the role of state museums in representing our past by Abu Talib Ahmad appears in the December 2008 issue of

The Malay Mail

15/3/3 Ms IS



SMOKEY HISTORY CHRONICLED: Muzium Chimney in Tanjung Kubong, Labuan features the famous 32.5m red brick stack believed to be linked to the coal mining days of Labuan — Pic: MUSEUMS DEPARTMENT MALAYSIA

the *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*.

In terms of representing our different histories and also in terms of curatorship, there seems to be a wide diversion in quality and consistency across the country, so it is worth noting the different setups that exist.

There are 21 museums that come under the federal Department of Museums, including Muzium Negara in Kuala Lumpur and an astonishing three in Labuan — one is called Muzium Chimney!

Then there are umpteen

museums that come under the respective State Museum Boards. The galleries about our former prime ministers are run by the National Archives, and the military has museums for each of its three main branches. GLCs can have museums too, like Telekom Malaysia's Telecommunications Museum, and then there are of course private initiatives like the Islamic Arts Museum.

All of this is not necessarily a bad thing — I am an advocate of decentralisation in most sectors so as to encourage competition, innovation

and efficiency — but there could perhaps be a concerted joint effort to better transmit the knowledge contained in these buildings to (especially younger) Malaysians. One of the questions I ask the staff at any museum I visit is how many students visit, and the answer is always lower than ideal.

This is particularly distressing when we know that the content of history textbooks is politicised or when we hear that some teachers go off tangent and teach racist garbage. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why many

intelligent, otherwise well-informed Malaysians only heard names like Baron von Overbeck and Alfred Dent last week in contextualising the siege in Lahad Datu. In my experience, the sheer tangibility of artefacts in a museum can trigger a whole new voyage of discovery that textbooks in classrooms cannot.

I was therefore pleased to see that a large multiracial group of students from a private college had just finished their tour as I arrived at the old Istana Negara, and they all seemed very enthused about what they had just seen. It was comforting to know that at least these young Malaysians were connecting to the country's top institution.

As aspects of our history are manipulated by those with a short-term agenda, it's essential that our publicly-funded museums be curated and maintained in an apolitical way. Furthermore, museums that provide contrarian views must be allowed to surface too — for there are many dangers when a single party enjoys a monopoly over history, just as it is catastrophic when a single party enjoys a monopoly over the economy.