

MERDEKA ADDRESS BY MRS RAHANI JAMIL, DIRECTOR-GENERAL, NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF MALAYSIA, TO MEMBERS OF THE INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION, KUALA LUMPUR; AUDITORIUM, MEMORIAL TUNKU ABDUL RAHMAN PUTRA, JALAN DATO' ONN, 50480 KUALA LUMPUR, 18 AUGUST 2004

Mrs. Randa Halabi,
President, International Women's Association Kuala Lumpur,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me express, at the outset, how happy indeed I am to be able to address the gathering here this morning.

As all of you must be aware, it was just yesterday that the Prime Minister of Malaysia launched the Independence Month or Bulan Kemerdekaan which falls between 17 August to 16 September. You may be wondering why we need to devote an entire month for the observance of Merdeka. The answer is that although Malaya obtained her independence on 31 August 1957, we have to take into consideration the special position of Sabah and Sarawak which obtained their independence from the British when they joined the Federation of Malaya on 16 September 1963 to form what is today known as Malaysia.

Merdeka brought an end to 400 years of colonization. It ended about four and a half centuries of colonial rule in Malaya. Our colonial history had begun in 1511 when a Portuguese fleet led by Alfonso de Albuquerque and lured by the spice trade, sailed into Malacca's harbour, thus bringing the golden age of Malacca to an end. Portuguese rule was followed by Dutch rule which lasted more than 180 years.

Britain ruled the waves for the best part of our history, even during the period of the Dutch presence in Malaya.

It was only on August 31 1957 that a new era dawned in the history of the country. At the stroke of the midnight hour, the chorus of a cheering crowd cried out to the world: we are now a nation!

It was a memorable scene at the K.L. Padang. The function was organized by the youths of the 3 component parties within the ruling Alliance: UMNO, MCA and MIC.

The Padang symbolized British sovereignty as it was a cricket ground for the colonial administrators. It fronted the Selangor Club, which used to be Malaya's most exclusive whites' only club. Today, this Padang is known as the Dataran Merdeka. The world's tallest flagpole stands here as the focal point of Merdeka Day celebrations. You may be

interested to know that about 130 years ago this place was the scene of atap houses of Chinese tin miners.

Returning to more modern times, it was here that Union Jack was lowered gradually to the strains of *God Save The Queen* for the last time. The new flag of Malaya was hoisted to the rhythm of the *Negara-Ku* that was played in the public for the first time.

The next day was the official function held at a large stadium specially built for this purpose. It is called Merdeka Stadium.

The hero of the moment was Tunku Abdul Rahman. Merdeka had been won through the force of his colourful personality.

In the historical moment, in a voice choked with emotion, the Tunku called out “Merdeka” 7 times and the people echoed his victorious cries.

A new page had been turned, as Malaya stepped forth to assume her rightful place as a free and independent partner in the great community of nations. The jewel of her independence was mounted in the unrivalled setting of the Commonwealth and as the 82nd member of the United Nations.

Malaya became a Parliamentary democracy, with the Yang Di-Pertuan Agong as the Head of the Nation, and the Prime Minister as Head of the Government.

Malaya inherited the highest standard of living in Southeast Asia, equal justice before the law, a civil service that was forged to perfection by successive British administrators, and the ideals of democracy.

It was in this very year of our Merdeka that the National Archives of Malaysia was born on 1 December 1957.

On 16 September 1963, the same Tunku who gave us our independence also succeeded in creating the Federation of Malaysia comprising the Federation of Malaya, Sabah and Sarawak.

RECORDS AND MERDEKA

In accordance with the National Archives Act (2003), the Archives is entrusted with the responsibility to acquire and preserve public records and also any other record in private hands that have value for reference and research. These records are available in various forms such as documents, files, photographs, publications, film materials, tape recordings and posters.

These records represent a treasure house of memories, and a repository of knowledge that is imperative for the success of Merdeka. There is no nation in the world that has ignored

the need to preserve the record of its own ideals of nationhood, nor is there a nation whose citizens have not been stirred by the records of our memory of Independence.

Let us now take a look at some of these records.

Proclamation Of Independence

One of the most important documents kept in the Archives is the Proclamation of Independence. The ideal of democracy that is guaranteed in the Proclamation of independence grants the individual a sense of the dignity, self-respect and worth that enables him to make meaningful contributions to nation development.

The Proclamation is a salute to the nation : it begins and ends with the firm conviction that in the name of the Lord of the Universe, and with His blessings, we shall be forever a sovereign, democratic and independent nation founded upon the principles of liberty and justice, and ever seeking the welfare and happiness of its people and the maintenance of a just peace among all nations.

Government Files

Most government files of the period have references to Merdeka. The Prime Minister's Department was the main department in charge of organizing the official function. Therefore, we need to look into the files of this particular department in order to get an idea of how the function was organised. Some of the files, however, are still confidential and have not been declassified.

Photographic Collection

We have a number of photographs on Merdeka, including the official Merdeka album.

Some of the photographs in this collection show the official ceremony of Merdeka. They also shows the origins of the institution of the Yang Di-Pertuan Agong who represents the symbol of our independence. It was on Independence Day that His Majesty Tunku Abdul Rahman ibni Al-Marhum Tuanku Muhammad was sworn in as the 1st King of Malaya in a ceremony that was unparalleled in both pageantry and colour at the throneroom of the newly raised Istana Negara.

Private Paper Collection

This refers to the personal collection of archives in the possession of individuals. There is a large number of private paper collections relating to Merdeka among the archives of prominent leaders such as Sir Tun Tan Cheng Lock and Tun Leong Yew Koh.

Records Of Political Parties

Records of political parties such as that of UMNO also constitute an important part of our collection of records on Merdeka.

Oral History

Oral history recordings are yet another source of information on Merdeka. They give us an insight into important events as seen through the life experiences of individual actors.

Role of the Archives Through Outreach Activities

The National Archives gives special attention to the Merdeka anniversary every year. The Independence anniversary gives the Archives the opportunity to imbue a strong sense of patriotism among the younger generation through activities such as Merdeka Talks, inter-school debates, as well as exhibitions.

More importantly, we have a Memorial specially dedicated to Merdeka. This is located in Malacca, and is known as the Proclamation of Independence Memorial. We also have Memorials dedicated to our founding father of Independence, Tunku Abdul Rahman. The records in these institutions contain a great deal of information on Merdeka.

Records Support the Spirit of Nationalism and Merdeka

Merdeka is the epitome of patriotism and nationalism, which have their roots in a common past and blossoms in a future that is based on shared destiny. To accomplish this sense of Merdeka, we need records. Records give us a sense of pride in our past accomplishments, and the confidence to stand tall amongst the nations of the world. This sense of pride and confidence is necessary for our dignity as a sovereign and independent nation.

Records Reveal Our Historical Identity

The discovery of our historical identity calls for documented evidences of the past that take us along the voyage of time. The archives help us understand our historical identity through the shifting panorama of time, from the early days of the Malacca Sultanate, through the adventures of colonialism, right up to the history of our freedom movement.

The history of Merdeka evokes a sense of collective identity. They remind us that we are heirs to a common heritage, inspired by the common experience of nationhood.

Records Are Important In Forging National Unity

We at the National Archives realized that the common struggle for independence by the different races provides a powerful basis for the creation of a shared national identity. We need to emphasize that if Merdeka is to have any meaning, we must ensure that Merdeka is not just for the Malays, but for each and every citizen of this country.

If our people do not have this historical identity, it will be difficult for them to come together as proud citizens united by historical bonds of a common past in confronting a shared destiny. In other words, it will be difficult for them, as a divided people, to imbue the form called Merdeka with the spirit of content and substance.

The Archives has a role to play in reinforcing the memory of a shared past as a means of developing this common identity that allows the citizens to relate meaningfully with each another across the artificial divide of race, religion and ideology. Towards this end, the National Archives must ensure that the collective memory of a common history remains intact and inviolate for the different races in our country. We need to seriously acquire such records as depict the role played by the different communities in nation building. This collective memory provides the cement that holds our nation together through good times and bad times, in common pursuit of the ideals of Merdeka. Through the force of historical examples we need to gradually lead the different races in the country to discover a large identity that transcends their limited loyalties to races and religion. Highlighting the common struggle of the different races for liberation from the colonial experience is therefore a matter of vital concern to archivists.

Records are Evidence

Archives are needed in the legal preservation of our Merdeka. Archives support our legal claims to Merdeka. Archives preserves the evidence of Merdeka by acting as the legal custodian of the records. The archives on Merdeka preserve the evidence of what we have gained through Merdeka, and what we hope to accomplish through Merdeka.

The Archives ensures the integrity of our claims to Merdeka by ensuring that throughout its life-cycle, the records have remained inviolate through the chain of official custody.

Records Remind Us of Our Ideals and the Need To Work Towards These Ideals

In most countries of the world, Independence represents the flowering of culture, the awakening of the human spirit, and the quest for spiritual ideals. It is associated with enlightenment, grandeur and power; it idealises a utopian society in which the material existence of Man and the preservation of human life and dignity are well regulated; a society engaged in the pursuit of moral and intellectual excellence; a society at its time of greatest virtues; a society in which physical force gives way to moral power; where letters, science and the arts display their splendour; and a society at a time when great men lived and were honoured. The opposite is a society that is incurably divided against

itself, in which the people choose to settle in their own comforts, unmindful of the virtues of sacrifice and human goodness. There is no example of virtues and high ideals in such a society.

Records help us to re-discover the beauty that lies at the heart of our experience of nationhood. The records of our Independence help us as citizens to find meaning and purpose in the present, and to chart the course of our future. We have in the history of our independence the model of a society that is charged with such ideals as are important for nation building in the present. We are inspired towards the right direction in both the present and the future. We are inspired to reach out to the very frontiers of our abilities and creative potentials, thereby equipping ourselves for nation building.

Records of National Leaders in the Past Inspire Us in The Present and the Future

Records of our heroes and heroines inspire us in the path of service to our fellow citizens. Their lives may be offered for moral edification.

In this connection I wish to emphasise that the records on Merdeka show Malaysian women to be central players in the struggle for freedom from the fetters of colonial rule. The lives of great women such as Ibu Zain, Khadijah Sidek, Puteh Maria, Tan Sri Aishah Ghani and countless others continue to serve as worthy models for our women. The records serve to restore women's rightful pride of place in the annals of history.

Records Ensure the Continued Transmission of the Spirit of Merdeka from Generation To Generation

For Merdeka to succeed, we need records that will help transmit the collective memory of Independence from one generation to the next. Records are needed because it is not otherwise possible for us to individually transmit this memory from our generation to the next generation. The records are needed for the continued transmission of the ideals and principles of Merdeka. The collective memory of our shared experiences that these records have captured, must ensure the continued survival of the spirit of independence through the ages.

Dear friends, let me conclude my talk this morning with a hope: that the legacy of Merdeka will continue to be the one great prize of which we and our great grandchildren can be the proud heirs.