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Gawai fest a window into harmony



By **Dr Vishalache Balakrishnan** - June 14, 2017 @ 10:40am

I EXPERIENCED Hari Gawai in a longhouse in Saratok, 310km from Kuching, this year.

It has been my wish to experience Gawai celebrations in a longhouse.

In writing Civics and Citizenship as well as Moral Education textbooks, I did ample research on Sabah and Sarawak's culture and festivals to include these in textbooks.

After driving for almost 4½ hours from Kuching on a bumpy road, we arrived at Kerupok Longhouse. Built using the latest technology, the house is fitted with air-conditioners.

Most longhouses have modern facilities, especially those near towns and cities. However, the cultural aspects are maintained and adapted.

Great respect is given to Tuai Rumah, the headman of the longhouse.

He has a committee to help him run the longhouse and deal with local council matters.

On the eve of Gawai, every family at the longhouse prepares food to be shared with relatives and friends.

Imagine 30 tables spread out with food. You can move from one table to another to enjoy the food.

And the *makan di ruai* (eating on the veranda) was a memorable experience.

Everyone was so warm and friendly that I wondered why we were not promoting such communal habits in Peninsular Malaysia.

Everyone was treated kindly and the mood, one of joy and bliss, was at its height.

As most of the inhabitants of the longhouse were Christians, animistic rituals were not performed.

However, just before midnight, speeches were given by Tuai Rumah and elderly individuals.

A short prayer was recited and at midnight, Tuai Rumah led a toast to longevity (*Ai Pengayu*).

Again, the feelings of tolerance and mutual respect were evident.

Those who drank liquor made the toast with *tuak* prepared by locals, especially for Gawai.

Those who did not drink liquor were given juices. After the toast, snacks were passed around and the celebrations went on till early in the morning.

Dancing and singing were part of the celebrations and I had fun doing *pocho-pocho*.

The sad part was when one longhouse member welcomed me and my family and expressed his hope that we in Peninsular Malaysia understood the history and culture of Sarawak.

He said there were people in the peninsula who told him things like “Welcome to Malaysia” or asked questions like “What is your currency in Sarawak called?”

There is a need to include multicultural education into the education system to ensure that future generations have a shared vision of multiculturalism and a plural harmonious nation.

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