

HIMANSHU BHATT/THESUN



The Batek tribe in the jungles of the Malay peninsula are among the numerous orang asli whose roots are traced here since time immemorial.



# Seeing beyond 1957

BY HIMANSHU BHATT

**A**BOUT two million years ago, there lived in a fertile valley, in an area now known as Lenggong, in the Malay peninsula a community of at least a thousand people. Coexisting amid the verdant greenery, they hunted and fished, foraged the earth, and very likely planted crops. They had families, practised rituals and communicated with each other.

Very importantly, these people used tools – knives, chisels, spears and so on – forged from the wood and stones around them.

One day, as the settlers were going about their chores, they would have noticed a brilliant flash emanating in the sky above, followed by a terrifying sight of a fireball speeding in their direction.

In an instant, everyone in the settlement perished; the children, the adults, the elderly, with their belongings and homes, all disappearing in a scorching conflagration from the meteor that struck the valley.

The existence of these people, who lived in the Neolithic or Old Stone Age period, was never known of again. Until now. Malaysian

archaeologists stumbled on bones, teeth and tools spread across the sprawling four sq km area of the valley today named Bukit Bunuh.

I have visited this site, and have felt with my hands these objects of the past which once belonged to the ill-fated people. As one surveys the place, it is difficult to shake off an overwhelming sensation that this land was once inhabited by a very different people.

The experience stirs a profound awareness – that there are many more untold legacies of this country we call our home, just as there have been myriad other people who have also lived here across the length and breadth of time.

My reflections become even more acute as we approach Merdeka Day, easily the most revered and recognised occasion today to commemorate a nation we have named Malaysia. The celebrations mark the political independence of the country from British rule, on Aug 31, 1957.

This date is, however, an extremely recent milestone – in the framework of a much longer timeline in the existence of this whole land and its inhabitants.

While many refer to Malaysia as being 54 years old, its attributes and richness – in ethnography and

geography – have been here since time immemorial; from these Old Stone Age societies of Lenggong to the ancient rainforests occupied by the indigenous folk of Peninsular Malaysia and Sabah and Sarawak; from the Bujang Valley civilisation of 2,000 years ago to Peranakan cultures evolving in the 15th and 16th centuries.

As a journalist I have had the privilege to venture to places where there are such rich remnants of the past, even as I have met cultures that have survived from ancient times.

I remember once, while trekking through the jungles of Pahang, venturing into an orang asli settlement of a Batek tribe whose members hardly interact with the outside world. It certainly made for a strange eye-opening experience.

All my life I have somehow taken for granted that my formal identity has been fixed by my registration since birth as a citizen of Malaysia. But now here I was with a group of people in the deep forest who did not have a care in the world for such formal labelling. Most had never even heard of Malaysia or of Merdeka, and neither did they care for such “outside” concepts.

Yet, for me, these simple Batek folk seemed to have a much higher claim, moral and spiritual, over this land in which they have lived since time



Neolithic skeletons found in Gua Kain Hitam, Sarawak, at the laboratory of USM's Centre for Archaeological Research.

An archaeologist unearthing the remains of a Neolithic human skeleton at a mangrove swamp in Pulau Kalumpang, Perak.



## A patriot home and away

BY SORAYA KEE

**O**N AN average day at Mount Holyoke College, the Massachusetts school she attends, 22-year-old Emily Chow might finish debating creation versus evolution with classmates, stop for turkey bacon grilled cheese at one of her school's dining halls, and rush to her next class to discuss John Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

Chow is one of about 6,500 Malaysians studying in the United States, where the diversity of classes available to her doesn't just permeate her academic curriculum – it's also

been a key aspect of her entire educational experience. At college, she's had the chance to learn everything from belly dancing to Japanese martial arts, and earlier this year she spent a semester in Turkey taking classes in Islamic art and political philosophy.

Malaysians are drawn abroad for many reasons, but it's hard to deny that options and opportunities are a large part of the attraction. With Malaysian universities floundering in the hundreds in international rankings, it comes as no surprise that students are seeking greener – and more holistic – pastures overseas. Chow says the education system she's been exposed to has taught her the importance of cultivating

independent thought and an open mind.

Medical student Alison Lopez, 21, has been studying in Canada for just four months, but can already see the difference. “Doctors here actually enjoy teaching,” she says. “Back home, they seem to enjoy making you feel bad about yourself, especially if you ask a question. I do feel I'm getting a better medical education here, because the doctors here love to teach and keep their students involved.”

For Malaysians working abroad, better pay is also tremendously attractive. Thor Eu Ric, 25, works part-time at a Melbourne architectural firm. “I realise I'm glad I work in Australia every fortnight,

when I receive my pay,” he admits. “Then I take that figure and multiply it by 3.2, and then I'm ecstatic.” Fairer opportunities, in both the university and workplace, are yet another factor – Lopez explains that at her school, “No one judges you by your race. If you do a good job, you get praise. If you don't do a good job, they use it as a way to teach you.”

For some, the notion of the homesick Malaysian hunched miserably over a pot of Maggi Mee is a myth. South Africa-based Joey Poh, 22, says she has often considered only returning to Malaysia for holidays. “Strangely, it has never made me feel unpatriotic,” she says. “I think it's because in my heart of hearts, I know I will always be Malaysian and feel



Joey Poh.