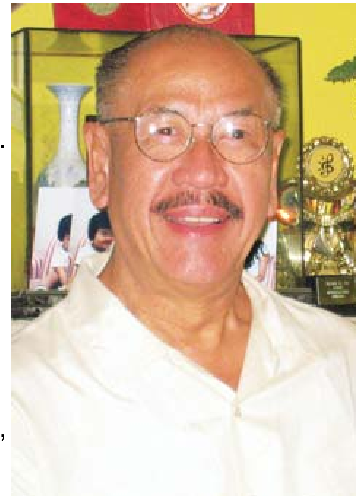
Two 'budak Cina' in a Malay household

***IN** this poignant tale that grew out of a eulogy for his late elder brother Say Teik, **MARTIN LIM** recounts their extraordinary teenage years – two "budak Cina" growing up in a Malay household in Kampung Teluk Wan Jah, Alor Star, and the lessons he learnt that have shaped his life. The story, invested with delightful details, transports us to a gentler era around the time of the declaration of Independence.*

THE year was 1955. Alor Star was your typical small town in pre-independent Malaya. Seemingly quiet on the commercial facade, but buzzing with life behind its private residential walls.


Martin Lim

Pekan China was a business street to the Chinese and running parallel to it was Pekan Melayu. This major thoroughfare was, and, still is, lined with a few kopitiam at its south end, and goldsmith shops to the north, ending with the beautiful, classical Masjid Zahir.

The Empire Theatre sat imposingly, across from Pekan Rabu, on the eastern side, while Jalan Langgar on its south, was flanked by a mixture of shops, including the ever-present "chettiars".

Children, like me, in our respective loyal uniform, brown and white, green and white, white and white, were noisy as we made our way to school. It was not my usual morning, as I walked past my old school, St Michael's, towards Sultan Abdul Hamid College (SAHC), my new school.

The night before had been eventful. It was close to midnight. My father had fallen very ill. Our step-mother, his third wife, was worried. She asked me to fetch his personal doctor. I did, peddling my Raleigh as fast as my legs would pump, from Lorong Merpati where our small two-bedroom house was through the dark town, zipping by the majestic Balai Besar until, finally, curving in front of the eerie Nobat tower and across to the doctor's fenced residence in Kampung Baharu.

My yells were unforgettably loud in that midnight quietude. The screams woke him up. Some frantic identification and explanations followed. Satisfied and convinced, he drove to our house. Administered an injection, our father gradually found comfort and drifted to sleep, snoring loudly.

He was breathing abnormally heavy when I left him that morning.

An hour or two later, I was back in the house. My brother, Say Teik, had come by my classroom, and in between sobs, announced that our father had passed away.

Even though my father had only recently been baptised a Catholic, his subsequent funeral and burial, three days later, was in traditional Buddhist, all to the tight-lipped insistence of Lim Eng Hoe, our strict grandfather.

Our paternal great-great-grandfather, Lim Hua Chiam, was a past president of one of the more prestigious Chinese kongsis in Penang at the beginning of the last century.

He was the "pendatang" in our family lineage, the first to emigrate out of Fujian, China, to Malaya.

We only learnt, quite recently, that he might have been instrumental in leading the Hokkiens to fight the Cantonese in a well-documented local communal uprising, sometime during the start of the 20th Century in Penang.

How we ended up living in a Malay household

We were staunch, traditional Chinese, although Peranakan by choice. Babas on our father's end, Nyonyas on our mother's. We grew up learning never to stray from our established roots. Inter-racial marriage was a constant no-no reminder.

Skin colour was a segregational determinant in our dating. "Chinese we are and Chinese you will stay!" almost became the family cry.

Therefore, it was a heart-wrenching commotion when our mother, Ooi Ah Ean, divorced our father, converted to Islam and renamed Fatimah binti Abdullah to marry Abdul Rahman bin Shamsuddin, a Malay. As a consequence, she was disowned and ex-communicated in our Chinese family.

Naturally, my brother and I felt threatened. It was an unimaginably difficult situation to place two unfortunate young boys in. However, we somehow survived the ordeal. And, now, three years or so after that traumatic change in our household, my brother and I found ourselves, once again, in a new predicament, the death of a much revered father. How could anybody replace him, let alone a Malay and a Muslim?

It was not easy, to say the least, in view of the racial, cultural, religious, and colour barriers we had grown up with.

Luckily for us, we had spent time with this "pak-tiri" before, on a number of occasions, on school holidays, in Langkawi. He had been posted over there. We had also met and shared many happy days with our step-siblings, Meh and Kak Nab, scaring them with made-up stories of "orang minyak" (oily man).

Some of the preconceived notions we had constructed began to be demolished, unconsciously remoulded and altered because of these earlier contacts. We were both treated with unusual kindness, patience, thoughtful attention, inclusion, trust and non-threatening approaches to our learning and gradual adaptation to a Malay family.

But still, the thought of having to move in with the Malay "Pak-cik", the new term for us to address our step-father, his Malay children, our "jib-huan" (in Hokkien, a convert) mother, in Teluk Wan Jah, a very Malay kampung, left both of us close to tears, uncertain of our own future.

Moreover, we did not want to risk hurting the vital linkage to our Chinese family either.

Fortunately, when the moment came to move in, Pak-cik was receptively warm and welcoming. He was aware of our teenage plight, confusion, and vulnerability. He quietly made us feel wanted, took time to assure us and more importantly, gave us a lot of personal space to learn, observe, and grow in the new Malay family.

Above all else, he never forced us into Islam. Clearly, here was a man who fervently placed religious choice on a personal level. The Holy Quran, as I remember, was always placed prominently in the glass cabinet in the living room. Respectfully, this was probably our step-father's way of inviting all of us to inspect its contents. He always made himself easily accessible if we had enquiries.

Learning 'adat'

Our introduction to Malay customs started with placing our footwear outside the door. Our mother explained that shoes and slippers tended to carry all kinds of unwelcomed dirt, and wearing them into the house would have dirtied the living space.

Moving barefoot in the house also meant we had to keep our feet washed and clean. We found out only too quickly how merciless the household rats could be, sleeping on the floor with unwashed feet. Those nocturnal creatures would nibble our toes until they bled. We would wake up in agony.

Washing is a very essential Malay practice. We familiarised ourselves with the term "najis" (excrement). We washed our hands before a meal. We washed ourselves after using the toilet. We ceased using toilet rolls.

Sarongs now replaced our customary shorts and pajamas when home. We learnt to position the correct designed part of the kain in the back, overlap the front fold and to neatly roll the top down uniformly with measured tightness. Then there was the cultured way of sitting as opposed to, as my mother would put it, the uncivilised way.

"Jangan-lah 'dok kankang ... Lipat-lah kaki hang 'tu ... 'dok-lah sila," our mother would drum into us. ("Don't sit with your legs wide apart. Cross your legs".)

She would converse in Malay with us; but would use Hokkien frequently too. She was quite adamant about our Malay. "Cakap pun macham 'apek'. Cuba cakap macam orang Melayu," she would tease us, even though her own pronunciation, often times, needed our giggling corrections.

("You both speak like a Chinese 'uncle'. Try speaking Malay like a Malay.")

She was right. Respect and amazement usually attend the one who speaks a language foreign to him commandingly.

Lim (standing third from left) and Say Teik (standing fifth from left) with their step-father Abdul Rahman and mum Ooi Ah Ean (seated in centre) in a black-and-white family photo that had been hand-coloured.

"Speak English like an English or don't speak at all," one past colonial headmaster at the SAHC used to boom at us.

Our mother was no religious slouch either. She did her share of daily observances, went for her pilgrimage and, faithfully continued her Muslim practices until her passing in 1997.

She continued to educate us in Malay manners during our teen years. "Kaki-tu yang bisa sekali," she used to emphasise. "Kepala pantang sunggoh! "

She said to the Malays, the leg or foot is the most insulting (part of our body), while the head the most esteemed.

Never point your toes at a Malay, or for that matter, at anyone. This is totally unacceptable. I once smacked the outstretched foot of one of my impudent college students, here in the USA, off the front table, much to his consternation, and my resentment.

That was not my normal behaviour. I had felt instinctively insulted. Of course, he was customarily ignorant of his action. I did explain to him, quite elaborately (including a geographical map), the cultural significance of his foot-placement, in Malaysia, a country I had come from.

I would like to think that he learnt a rewarding lesson that day. And, never, never touch nor slap the head, even in jest. As a matter of fact, I recall someone telling me, following a question from me, some 50-odd years ago, as to why Malay men wear the songkok. He told me, in earnest, that it was more of a religious reminder that Allah was that high above the head, notwithstanding that there's where our brain is also located. I took him at his word, and never thought about authenticating his explanation.

It was my step-father who pointed out to me that the threshold of the front door to a Malay house is quite sacred.

I was sitting in our silent, tidy living room, one hot, humid, stifling afternoon, when a stranger walked up to our front door. He asked, somewhat rudely, to see Abdul Rahman. I went to the back to fetch my step-father. When we entered the front-room, he suddenly let out a fierce yell: "Celaka! Orang ta' dak adat! Kurang ajar! Keluar dari sini! " (Person without custom. Poorly brought up. Get out of here.)

With that, he shoved the shocked "guest" out of the door, and slammed the door shut.

When he had calmed down, he explained: "The visitor had it coming. He crossed over the threshold of our front-door. He had done this once before, uninvited. I had warned him, then. It is customary that if you are a guest to a Malay home, you wait outside the threshold to the host's house, until invited to enter. You never cross it. Failing to do this, you insult the host."

This is true of many other cultures. He also told me "to wait at the main door until the guests have all departed before shutting it. Do not insult them by closing the door before they have left."

Even to these days, I still wait at the main entrance to our home, much to the amusement of some of my American guests, waving, until all have completely driven away.

We were also instructed, as a gesture of respect and politeness, to bow with one hand stretched down by the side, in front of people older than us whenever we walk pass close to them. Our mother used to kick our butt playfully, as a reminder, anytime she caught us not doing this. "Tunduk! " she would order.

When I first arrived in the USA, I remember passing by my daughters' late maternal grandfather, Fred Voigt, one evening in their home, outside Brownsville, Oregon, when he tugged on my side, and asked why I did that each time I passed by his wife or him.

I explained. He was impressed, but lamented its absence in their American culture.

Our mother continued to be the cultural teacher. She was always reminding us of the Malay proverb, "Biar mati anak, jangan mati adat! " (The importance of customs and manners in the Malay culture outweigh even the value of one's child, in a manner of speaking).

She would advise us on how to address various relatives and friends in the kampung – mak-lang, pak-lang, chu-Darus, pak-Mat, mak-Tam, mak-Embon, together with their acceptable protocols in greeting and salutation.

There were days in Kampung Telok Wan Jah, when someone in the neighbourhood would bring a dish of special food to share. Mak-Mah, our mother as she was known by the children, would place some sugar in the clean plate after it was washed and dried. When asked about the sugar, she said it was customary among the Malays to thank the giver by either returning the container with food, or if none was available, a lump of sugar. One never handed back a gift-plate empty.

Our diet at home also changed, in due course. The food we were eating "mutated" and became spicier and spicier. It gradually obliterated the blander food we were accustomed to. The sambal-belacan for our daily ulam intake took on a new mixture of cabai-melaka mixture. Each dish grew "hotter". So did the curry. It was not good enough unless we slapped our thighs in blistering pain, with every gulp. Only the daun-kadok santan remained cooling to our flaming tongues. The enjoyment by the entire household over our mother's cooking was close to being festive.

Thankfully, she passed this skill on to our adopted sister, Zaini.

We helped raise and mould her. At the age of three, Anak-ku Sazali, became her signature song. We taught her to sing that. She is now in her early 50's, happily married to Putra for the past 29 years. They have five children.

When Say Teik, her "bang-Hor", was dying in the hospital of lung cancer complications, in June, she sat faithfully in vigil, never leaving his side except for prayer, the powder-room, or home for the night. But she would be right back early the following morning, sitting by our brother, shedding her share of tears. That's dedication and love.

Memories of 'berkhatan' ceremony

The Hari Raya celebrations and the performing of the puberty rites, known as the sunat or berkhatan (circumcision) are probably the two most anticipated occasions in a Malay boy's life. Lighting the oil-lamps to mark a path to the house and spreading them on wooden posts around the house was as exciting and memorable as the sumptuous, colourful array of kueh-mueh (dessert) on all the clothed tables.

The puberty rites of my two step-brothers Fuad and Feisol remain etched in my mind. There's the long yellowish looking banana-tree trunk lying in the living-room, close to the kitchen entrance. The Tok-Mudin from the local madrasah and his assistant sat on opposite sides of the trunk. In between them were what looked like two bamboo skewers, the size of regular chop-sticks.

These stayed implanted, menacingly, in the shape of an 'X', into the trunk. There were only a few of us privileged witnesses present. The prayers began. Twelve-year-old Fuad, one year younger than his brother, Feisol, was led, gingerly, from the kitchen by the Tok-Mudin's helper to the appointed spot.

Fuad, covered only in a fresh white sheet of light-weight cotton cloth around his waist, knelt nervously on the man's instruction, close to where the two sticks stood waiting, stuck on the trunk. The pious man continued reciting Quranic verses, as he subtly reached out for the young man's prepuce, pulling it through the opening made by the straddling bamboo. The skewers were, then, pushed down quickly, over the foreskin, until they held it tightly in place.

Lim (second from left) and his late brother Say Teik (third from left) at the wedding of their nephew Zaid Fitri Abdul Rahman Putra and Erma Farizan in 2007, accompanied by Say Teik's family members.

Anticipation was written all over Fuad’s face. More, quicker verses followed, and, at hardly the blink of an eye, the Tok-Mudin, tugging on the extended epidermis with his left fingers and thumb, lopped it off with the small, sharp scalpel he had been holding in his right hand out of sight all this time. It was over. The boy became a man. He did not cry. He merely winced in momentary pain. Feisol’s turn came the year after.

Our choice

Say Teik and I lived with our Malay family until the end of 1959. By then, the Malay neighbours had grown accustomed to the two "budak Cina" in their midst. You could say they eventually, adopted us, and finally, made us one of their own, jokingly but fondly, nicknaming my brother, Yusof, and me, Halim.

Meanwhile, we kept our visits to our Chinese family, as often as permissible. That was important to us. It would be disingenuous of me if I failed to indicate here, that while we were growing up in the Malay house, the Chinese relatives of ours in Penang never interfered but never ceased to monitor our daily well-being either.

It is important to point out also, that it never occurred to us that we had to accept the living situation then, because the alternative was worse. We had an uncle, our father’s older brother, in Penang, and cousins to boot, who would have willingly taken us in. We had a choice.

I left for Brinsford-Lodge, England, in December 1959. My elder brother departed for training in the Health Ministry. I returned after two years and began teaching at SAHC, my alma mater. My brother completed his training, and was appointed a full-fledged health-inspector. He and Wong Foong Moi, a Seremban girl, also a health nurse, tied the knot in 1964. I was his best man.

I stayed on for two more years in the Telok Wan Jah home after returning from England, before moving into the SAHC hostel as one of the hostel-masters. I married a Peace Corps volunteer, Joan L. Voigt, in 1966, and migrated to the US at the end of that year.

The bigger picture

Two Chinese, living as Malays, with Malays, among Malays. Is there a bigger picture to be seen in all this? Possibly.

Other than the usual sibling rivalry, and suspicion among step-children, one begins to accept the idea, very quickly, that the real trick in getting along with people different from yourself, is not so much in your differences, but in your similarities, such as sharing common needs and working together to achieve those needs. Living with identical problems, and solving those problems, together.

Solutions must be based on the merits of total honesty, integrity, fairness and equity.

If it’s within a family, then the unity, security and success of that whole family become its overall consideration, not just the individuals in it.

Our own experience in co-living taught us to be cautious when making judgmental calls. All may not be what it seems.

Initially, my brother and I had to consciously suppress our innate and cultivated fear. Fear that we will be forced to convert our religious belief was foremost on our mind. Many well-meaning friends and relatives would shake their fingers at us as in warning as they voiced their suspicions to us. Time went by. What we feared did not materialise. Our uneasiness was allayed. We were encouraged. Our step-father became our trusted mentor. Mistrust, as we are well aware of, can be so insidious.

Pak-cik's no-nonsense honesty, together with his ever-positive outlook, gave us ample reasons to emulate him in many ways, so that all those misgivings and warnings we had been hearing, quietly dissipated.

In the absence of those two formidable walls – fear and mistrust – we were able to verify the real condition ourselves. We grew more adventurous. We found ourselves more open to learning and instructing. The kampung folk reciprocated, in turn. With new confidence, we started to visit the different neighbours in their homes more frequently, putting to use what we had learnt at home, the greeting, the bowing, the proper sitting position, the polite invitation before drinking or eating, until the final leaving.

We played with the boisterous children in the village, and, before too long, our spoken Malay improved. We began to speak Malay more like Malays. This was particularly important to me. Its fluency allowed me to blend into the family and community, provoking a sense of belonging. In exchange, we shared our Chinese background and practices, when asked by the curious, translating a host of everyday Malay usage into Hokkien.

As we settled in and grew more comfortable with ourselves, we realised that much of what we had been told in our previous "pre-Malay" period, were hearsays, innuendos, rumours, generalisations, passed down.

It would however be utterly naïve of me to pontificate that even though our personal observations dismissed a good amount of the negative assumptions we had heard in the past, that life in our kampung home was all peachy.

On the contrary, we had our fill of family "pecking" orders, including your everyday dissent and dissatisfaction. Every community comes with its share of builders and demolishers. People who either help garner the general good of the group or cause its demise. The Malays are no exception.

But it would be wrong to suggest that they are generally lazy, inefficient, unintelligent, manipulative, corrupt, non-ambitious, "earth-diggers". Their own achievements through the years are testimonies to their prowess.

Within the scale of the kampung children I grew up with, there's Din-garu, who went to work without shirking; Umak-siam, who, feeling obligated one day, enlisted in the army, and left our kampung, to fight in the Congo; Kassim, Mak-Tam's younger son, ended up a general in the army. My step-sister, Kak Nab retired a teacher, was herself Kirkby-trained. My step-brother, Feisol, academically successful in SAHC, was awarded a scholarship, went to Dublin, graduated from one of its fine universities, returned home, and has been doing very well ever since.

Our cousin-sister, Jumaah, is a lawyer by profession. Loyal to both her Malay and Chinese relatives, she is one highly motivated Datin. These are all very genuine, ordinary folk out of one

small, insignificant kampung, taking on what some might consider quite extraordinary feats. They reached their positions and goals, despite their race, not because of it.

Our dear old childhood friends, Syed Salem Albukhary, whose nomadic ancestors walked "the vast region comprising lands of Jazira al-Arab right through the sky-piercing ranges of Central and South-Asia", and Wan Ahmad Sobri Wan Tajuddin of humble Acheh-mix, come immediately to mind, as other figures whom this incredible category of high-achievers with very modest beginning, fit.

Fully aware of the ramifications, the people I am familiar with had to work even harder to prove their mental and professional worth. I had to do the same here in the US. I had to slog to maintain a high GPA (grade point average, academic achievement grade) throughout my university study, to convince the local folk (with their own racial bias, very pronounced at that time), that one's skin colour, looks, or race does not ultimately determine the measure of his intellect or personal character.

Generally, speaking, I see no glaring difference, growing up as a Chinese in a Chinese home, as opposed to a Malay one. Apart from their respective moral bearing, cultural cloak and religious conviction, both could be as ambitious, disciplined, capable, inventive, purposeful, patriotic, and fiercely competitive, given the appropriate equity, fairness, incentives, hope, aspirations and opportunities.

Within the confines of the family-building, there is no special treatment accorded to one member, and not the other; no extra share of the fortune or loss; no more chances than another; no more burden to one, and not the other; no one-sided reward; no lopsided punishment.

Since all have equal stakes in its success, all should have equal or equitable opportunities and responsibilities. The family head must lead inclusively, not exclusively.

The true culprits lie in oneself, our arrogance, our unwillingness, our close-mindedness, our envy, our jealousy, our selfishness, our convoluted bias, and our fears.

Race has very little to do with it.

Martin Lim Say Leong resides in the United States where he teaches. He still "balik kampung" whenever he finds the time.