Experts

# Malaysia Through Their Eyes: What International Students Understand About Us

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Sometimes we need a mirror as a reflection to see something that is already right in front of our eyes. Our country, Malaysia is no exception. After living here for a long time, we may not realize the small things that make Malaysia feel so close to us. Moments such as; smiling when we meet people, asking “Sudah makan (have you eaten)?”, sharing dishes, having friends from different backgrounds, and even the atmosphere at a surau which sometimes serves as a place where people from diverse backgrounds meet and sit together.

In order to appreciate those special moments, sometimes we need to look at Malaysia through other people perceptive. I found that perspective in a story shared by Universiti Malaysia Pahang Al-Sultan Abdullah (UMPSA) International students from Palestine, Mushtaha Eman A N. In his visit to a school in Ladang Lanchang, Temerloh Pahang, Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan (Tamil), Eman had a chance to conduct an activity with the students under the Service-Learning Malaysia, University for Society (SULAM) *Meriah Bahasa Melayu* Program.

The students were really excited to meet Eman. For some students, Palestine was only known as a country that they saw on television. But on that day, a country that was far and estranged, felt so close to them. There was a person from Palestine that they could meet, talk to, and even conduct activities together. In addition, to make the moment even more special, the activity was conducted using our national language, bahasa Melayu.

That moment was so simple, yet it made me wonder. A country that is so far away can be so near through human interaction. From that moment on, I started to view Malaysia through international students’ eyes. After more than ten years of teaching and interacting with international students, I always heard how those little and simple moments can be so special for them, even without us realizing it.

They come to Malaysia as a student, to study, but in that journey, they also learn about our language, our culture, Malaysian food, and our lifestyle. Sometimes, the first thing that they learn about Malaysia is something that is very simple.

With only two words; “Sudah makan? (have you eaten)”. That very basic question may sound very simple to us. Yet, for Eman, that was the question that attracted him about Malaysia. According to him, Malaysians are very generous with a simple gesture and always ask other people, “Sudah makan?”. As Malaysians, we may be used to that question, that we tend to forget the special meaning behind it. Through that question, it is not only to ask if that person has eaten or not, yet, it is a way for us to check on their condition. That is one of the ways for us to show care to each other.

That simple question can lead to something bigger, that is how food can bring people closer. Coming from Gabon, Apenene Gedeon Prunel has stayed in Malaysia for four years. When asked about

Malaysian food, his answer was very simple; “Nasi, nasi, nasi (rice, rice, rice).” According to Gedeon, people in Gabon mostly eat bread. In Malaysia, he eats rice in the morning, afternoon, and at night.

Now, rice is not just food to him, but it has become part of his daily routine. Even his food preferences have also changed. At first, he liked chicken, but now, he tends to choose fish. “Maybe it is because of the rice”, he shared with a smile. Here, we can see that not only his preferences in eating changes, but rice has also become part of his everyday life here.

Yet, food is not only about the taste. Sometimes, it connects us to other people. That is how Alsabaeei Amr Sadeq Ahmad from Yemen felt about food. Ramadan brought him closer to Malaysian as he got an opportunity to become an imam in a Surau. After prayers, people gathered and enjoyed eating together. From there, Amr Sadeq started to know local dishes that were unfamiliar to him before, such as Laksa Pahang and Puding Raja. While enjoying the dishes, he was not only knowing the names and the tastes of the food, but he also got to witness how Malaysians sit, eat, and spend time together.

For us, those moments during moreh at a surau are perhaps common during Ramadan. But for Amr Sadeq, that experience made him closer to Malaysia. Based on the stories shared with me, I started to realize that food acts like a door that opens to something that is meaningful. Behind a bowl of laksa, a slice of puding Raja, or even a plate of rice, there are people that meet, share and create moments together.

This was similar for Mohammed Ragab Ahmed Mostafa from Sudan. He has stayed here in Malaysia for almost 6 years. Malaysia is like his second home. Throughout his time here, he has made friends with people from different races, visited their houses and even spent the night there. The friendship was built through the time spent in his daily life.

Sometimes he played football in the evening and spend time with friends at the beaches near UMPSA, and at the same time, he learns bahasa Melayu. Perhaps for Malaysian, living with people from differences races and religions is something that is very common. We grow up seeing this kind of situation every day. Meanwhile for Mohammed Regab, that kind of experiences were gained through friendship, visits other people’s houses, games, conversation, and lifestyle in Malaysia.

From that, I noticed that sometimes most of us tend to overlook. Malaysia is not just a place; it is an experience of living together. That kind of experiences showcases our friendliness, helpfulness, and spirit of tolerance. For people that come from abroad, these manners slowly make them feel like home. Through these kinds of experiences and perceptions, make me look at Malaysia in a different way.

Within the past five years, I had an opportunity to participate in a parade for our National Day. What was unique was that I did not join this kind of activity in my schooldays. Only as an adult, I started to feel something different when I took part in it, standing in the line, waving the Jalur Gemilang, and together with other people celebrating Independence Day. Perhaps, the love for our country is something that can grow as well, through the experiences that we go through.

After listening to the stories from international students, I started to ask myself, “What do we understand about Malaysia, given that we are a part of it?” All these whiles, we just go on with our lives through the things that are already around us. We study at school and university, get treatment when sick, move from one place to another, and live in a peaceful environment. Yet, because we had

that since birth, some of use tend to overlook it.

We grow up with this; we use it every day. We live with it. Sometimes we may forget the value of it. Yet, if the same things are viewed by different people, coming from afar, the stories tend to be different. Sharing dishes at a friend's house can be a special moment. Playing football in the evening can be something cherished. Learning bahasa Melayu can be a bridge to build a friendship. Moments such breaking fast and moreh, can be a picture to show how Malaysians live. Even a university can be a special place, not just for learning.

Perhaps, this is one of the values that was nurtured through life at UMPSA. University is not only a place to study, but also as a space to introduce international students to our language, culture, and people. Here they build friendships, share experiences, and bring home stories about our country, Malaysia. Without us realizing it, they come to Malaysia to learn, but at the same time, the bring home something that will not be written in their academic transcripts, experiences and memories about Malaysia.

All this while, we are so used to our daily lives, that we miss the special things around us. Saying hi, sharing food, playing football, learning language, and even sitting together with different races. Those situations may seem very simple. Yet, for people that come from afar, those situations will slowly shape their story about Malaysia.

As the old folks say; *"Hujan emas di negeri orang, hujan batu di negeri sendiri, baik juga di negeri sendiri.*" Listening to their stories make us wonder, a place that is not a hometown, yet can feels very close. Maybe it is because the feeling of belonging does not necessarily come from where we were born. Sometimes it can be achieved from the people that we meet, the language that we learn, the food that we share, and the memories that we create together.

Maybe that is Malaysia, a country that is known not only by its places and name, but through its people, food, friendships, and shared moments. For this Malaysia Day, perhaps we can take this opportunity to reflect and view our country. This time around, not only through our own eyes, but through the eyes of people that come from afar. If we look at Malaysia through their eyes, we may realize that there are many things that we think are common but are actually deeply meaningful.

Perhaps, from that, we will get to know Malaysia better.

Happy Malaysia Day.



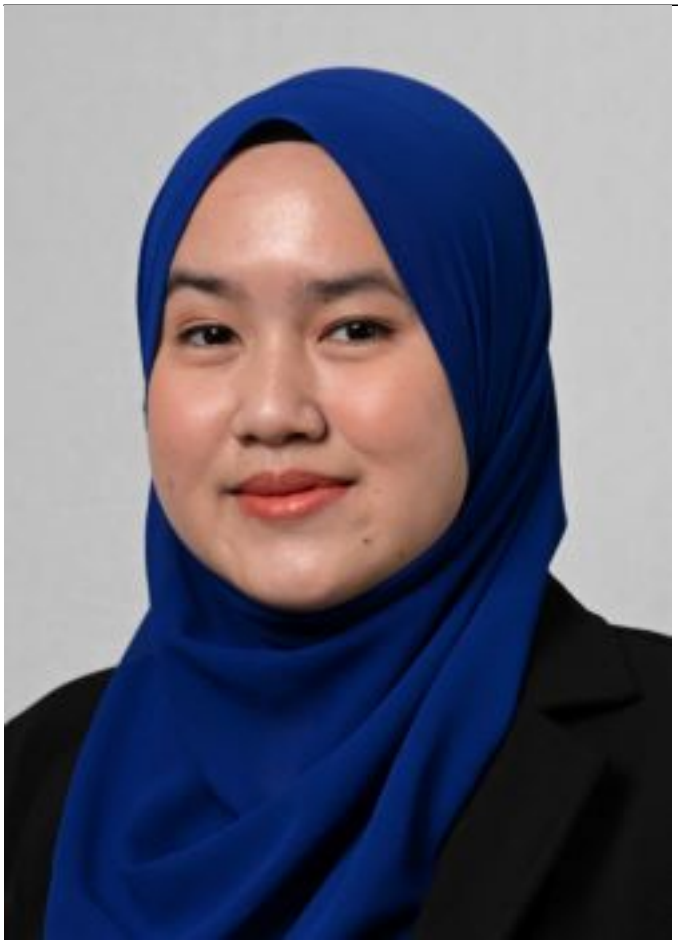
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