



By Dina Zaman

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SEPT 9 — Sometime ago, I went for a massage back in my kampong, Kuala Terengganu. Other women go to grand spas or have a faithful masseur come to their homes for a good urut. My Aunty Tita told me if I wanted the angin out of my system I had to visit Mocik Zainung, a former nurse. So I did.

“OOOWEKK! OEERGHHHH!” Mocik Zainung belched.

“Aaaaa sakit la Mocik Zainung! Toksoh picit kuat sangak!”

“Awok ni banyak anging. Boleh pam taya kete!”

“Adoiiii...!”

And then:

“Mbeek.... Mmbek...”

I stared at Mocik Zainung. She looked back at me. She got up and opened the front door and there was a fat white and black goat, bleating plaintively in the night.

Other women go to fancy spas. I went to a rumah setinggan somewhere in KT, whose owner kept a goat right next to her bedroom.

“Mmbek.”

Mocik Zainung is the local patois for Makcik Zainun. She lives alone with a goat, and when I visited, she was caring for an old invalid spinster aunt. Her house is made of wood and old zinc. The one bed she had, was taken up by her aunt. The rickety floors of her home moved up and down as we walked.

A young couple lived next door, which had a curtain and some wood panels separating their homes. Where they lived was not even legal; it was a small shanty community near an Indian temple, somewhere in the middle of Bandar Kuala Terengganu. Still, her home was tidy.

Everything had its place.

“Your wind problem isn’t that bad,” she said. “Angin orang China, India, lain dari orang Melayu.”

I looked up from the floor. Even angin is racial?

“Like how?” I asked.

The Malays’ angin problem is rooted in medu. Angin is always stuck in our solar plexus. This is why masseurs always concentrate on the area but because the Malays are always reciting prayers, the angin went away fast, she said. Now her Chinese customers, their diet is different, so their angin is bad. She has two female clients, and every time she massaged them, she’d have a headache. Chinese wind is difficult and stubborn! This is probably why they are driven and successful.

Did she have Indian clients?

Oh ya. This policeman who'd come with his wife and another. That was a different wind altogether. Those spices were not that good; they went to the head. Oh yes, you can know what they eat through massage, you know. However, she felt that it was the policeman's habit of exercising during Maghrib time that caused his body to ache. During that time there are many spirits wandering about. What made it difficult for her to urut his legs were that they were hairy, and because he always came after a badminton game, he was sweaty.

However, it was the Chinese wind that got her goat (pun not intended).

Her poor client suffered. When she picit at one place, the wind would run to her back. When she followed its trail, it would hide elsewhere. Makcik Zainun would recite and "call" for the angin to face her, but maybe it didn't understand Malay or Islamic zikirs "... kot."

I giggled. Then I laughed. The whole idea was preposterous. Angin is angin, yes? It didn't discriminate race, did it?

And then she laughed too. It's true what she said. There was a difference. It's like being us, she said. We may be human, but we come in all sorts of packages, no? We may all suffer from the same illness but the degree we go through is dependent on our genetic make-up.

At the end of the massage, she asked if I'd come back for another session. Yes, but only if I was back in KT.

"You'll have to come here, as I don't drive. City girl like you, you're used to fancy places. Will you be all right with this?"

As I paid her, I heard the young couple giggling next door. Makcik Zainun had told me earlier that they were newlyweds.

"Rumoh oghang mising, Cik Dina..." she smiled.

Sometimes I wonder whether we are too obsessed with race and faith. The mainstream newspapers and alternative media devote pages and articles to the two subjects; Malaysians in the sanctity of their homes talk about it, and intellectuals, activists and everyone and anyone with an opinion, have a piece or two to say.

Certain writers pontificate about liberalisation of race-based policies while public intellectuals speak of the great divide among Muslims themselves. Race and faith have become the Malaysian Bogeyman; every time the authorities and politicians think we need a right good thump on the head, scare tactics are used.

Really. In real life, are these two discussed or obsessed over at all?

Go to a rural area. It can either be predominantly Malay, Chinese or Indian. I'll give you an example. I'm from Terengganu, and no one seems to really care about one's ethnic colour. A neighbour makan babi. So what. Itu hal dia.

Dina, you know so and so's son had a Chinese girlfriend but they had to call off the engagement because her father was against the marriage? Kesian budok tu. They were so in love.

Rural Malaysians commiserate with each other over poverty, errant children and spouses. They can't be arsed about politics. What is the whole point of this column and writing about race, faith and what it means to be Malaysian then? The rest of Malaysia doesn't care. Or does it?

A Straits Time news report on June 19, 2009 quoted Khairy Jamaluddin's new approach, "... the politics of empathy." Umno Youth, of which he heads, has always concerned itself with Malay-centric issues, and that the organisation had helped an Indian woman collect birth certificates for her grandchildren was a important and strategic move, emboldening Umno Youth to transform themselves as a party for Malaysians. The fact that the old model (pro-Malay stance), Jamaluddin said, was rejected was proof that Umno Youth had to move beyond race based politics.

Hence if the Old Model had not been rejected, the status quo stays then?

Truthfully when I read the news in the mainstream and online media, including this very website, I wondered whether we all live in schizophrenic times. We speak to a liberal, middle-class elite: the educated. I'm not decrying their woes, for they are very real, but back home in KT and KB where my family is from, and most rural areas and smaller towns I have had the fortune to visit, no one talks about race.

I do not deny that my state has a lot of problems with substance abuse, HIV/AIDS and poverty, but you know what? We have to deal with serious real-life issues. The NEP does not exist in our lives because everyone we know is as poor or saddled with a problem or affliction.

Perhaps our angin is different, but the lives we lead and the people are similar no? Or is this too simplistic an ideal? And frankly. All this talk about race and religion ? You want to empower Malaysians, you give them access to stellar educational and financial opportunities. No tender-tender punya cerita. No more welfare mentality. No more political propaganda and campaigns.

I worked in branding and communications before — it's all poppycock. Give them hope that there is a future, because as far as people like Mocik Zainung are concerned, they will go to their graves poor, with very little resources to healthcare, financial independence, and one bleating goat, if it's not been slaughtered for Raya Qurban.

***Dina Zaman** writes so she can find answers. A lot of times, she doesn't. When she has free time, she reads literary fiction or very trashy magazines. Her pet causes are Tony Leung, children's rights advocacy and HIV/AIDS issues.*