

SPEECH BY MR MAH BOW TAN, MINISTER FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT, AT THE OPENING CEREMONY OF MALAY LANGUAGE MONTH AND LITERARY AWARDS 1999 ON 27 JUN 99 AT 3.00 PM AT THE BALLROOM, RAFFLES HOTEL

My Parliamentary colleagues,
Members of the Singapore Malay Language Council Organizing Committee,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen

I am very honored to be invited to officiate at the opening ceremony of this year's Malay Language Month.

The objectives of the Malay Language Month are to encourage a wider usage of the Malay language among members of our Malay community, and to express appreciation to those who promote writings in the Malay language.

A multi-racial country like Singapore has both strengths and weaknesses. On the one hand, a multi-racial society is constantly threatened by fault-lines that arise from differences in language, religion and culture. If these fault-lines are allowed to develop, if these differences become the basis of the people's thoughts and actions, we will face big problems. Such is the tragedy that has unfolded in the Balkan Peninsula, in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo.

On the other hand, if we use the diversity to enrich each other's cultural experiences, we can make this country exceptional and unique. This is the path we have chosen. By using our society's multi-racial culture, tradition, heritage and creativity to further enrich our cultural life, we can make Singapore a society of excellence.

Singapore is proud of people such as Masuri S N, Muhd Ariff Ahmad, Edwin Thumboo, Pan Shou, Liu Kang and Kuo Pao Kun. They reflect the heartbeat of our multi-racial society, even though they write in different languages. They are like flowers in a garden of various hues, fragrances and shapes. These differences make the Singapore cultural garden more attractive and varied. This is the essence of our success which we should preserve and promote.

In this regard, language has close links with a particular race and community. Language gives the community its unique identity. Through language, members of the community communicate, exchange views, learn about its customs, culture, traditions and values, and transmit this knowledge from one generation to another.

The Malay language is the mother tongue of the Malay community in Singapore. Through Malay, it can preserve its culture, customs, traditions and values. At the same time, through English, it can master new skills and technology. In this way, our Malay community can secure its future.

Singapore must prepare to transform itself into a knowledge-based economy. The Malay

community, like the other communities, must move together to face this challenge. We will step into the new millennium in a few months' time. Singaporeans of all races and from all walks of life can play a part to ensure that Singapore continues to enjoy growth in the new millennium. A strong economy and political stability will ensure that our children get good jobs and live in peace and comfort.

However, even as we strive to produce technopreneurs who will help to boost the Singapore economy, we should not forget our language and cultural elite. They are the ones with the talent and the skills to make sure that our mother tongues, be it Malay, or Chinese or Tamil , continue to be relevant in the era of sophisticated technology and in an increasingly borderless world.

The Malay Language Council can play its role by offering scholarships to top students who want to further their studies in Malay language and literature. This is one more way to ensure that we will not face a dearth of Malay language and cultural elite in the future.

Finally, I wish to congratulate the Malay Language Council of Singapore for organising the Malay Language Month and Literary Awards and may the council achieve success in promoting the Malay language in Singapore.

Thank you.