



**ISTANA ISKANDARIAH
KUALA KANGSAR**

**SPEECH
BY
HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS
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**AT THE
LAUNCH OF THE BOOK
*'LEGENDS, LESSONS, LOVE : A SMALL TOWN AND
AND ENGLISH SCHOOL*
BY
PROFESSOR JAMILAH ARIFFIN**

**DATE: 24th FEBRUARY 2018 (SATURDAY) TIME: 10.15 AM
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Bismillahirrahmanirrahim,

Assalamualaikum warrahmatullahi wabarakatuh,

1. As someone with a keen interest in the history of Malaysia, I warmly welcome the publication of any book that promises to shed light on any aspect of the past. This is even more the case when the author is such an esteemed academic and accomplished writer as Professor Jamilah Ariffin, let alone when my own state of Perak is the subject matter.

2. Professor Jamilah's latest publication more than fulfils these expectations, with its highly evocative depiction of life in the small but



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historically significant town of Tapah, at such a formative period in our country's history. The book, 'Legends, Lessons and Love : a small town and a British school,' provides a delightful portrait of what in retrospect seems like a period of long-lost innocence, sandwiched as it was between the brutalities of the Japanese Occupation and the loss of that innocence that followed the racial riots of 1969. It was also a time of great promise and possibility, as the newly independent nation was taking shape, and of relative security and stability, despite the ongoing Emergency and the dire poverty still suffered by some.

3. This sense of promise is brought vividly to life in the book, which brings together the different voices of Professor Jamilah's classmates and peers, along with a generous smattering of visual images, to provide a fascinating glimpse of what life was like in small-town Malaya, just as it was transitioning to become the independent nation of Malaysia. Unlike in traditional autobiography, the author has not allowed her own voice to dominate, and has instead invited her contemporaries to contribute their memories and views. This original method works very effectively, presenting a variety of perspectives in colourful vignettes that illuminate different aspects of the lives of the protagonists. These range from the rueful boy escaping expulsion after slapping a teacher, to the challenging journey to school faced by those coming from the outlying kampongs, pushing their bikes through mud in the rainy season, in some cases after early morning rubber tapping with their parents. The book is



like a rich tapestry woven through with different strands, voices and pictures, each adding layers of colour and depth to the overall whole. And throughout, the author's own authoritative voice guides us expertly through the material, giving it shape and meaning.

4. Through these many individual stories and accounts, we gain real insight into the lives of the protagonists and the institutions that shaped them, and especially the school they all attended. The Government English School of Tapah, or GEST, that is so affectionately described by its nostalgic alumni, is perhaps the real hero of the book. Its philosophies, routines and teaching staff seem to have been a source of life-long inspiration for those who attended. It provided a structure within which the author, her siblings, and her peers were not only able to flourish personally, but were also able to make valuable contributions to the new nation and beyond, in all of their various chosen fields. The school turned out Olympians and captains of industry, and its former students have reached the highest echelons in government, academia, and many other areas.

5. The sense of possibility and opportunity of this period that is so effectively evoked in 'Legends, Lessons and Love', and the central role played by the school, brings to mind the recent autobiography of another eminent academician, historian Professor Khoo Kay Kim or KKK. This



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also describes life in small-town Perak in the 1950s and 1960s, and similarly focuses on the formative role played by the school, and the particular type of British education that it imparted. As at GEST, there was a major focus on sport and its role in building character, as well as a recognition of the importance of abilities beyond the academic sphere. Although the British by no means have a monopoly on this approach to education, this focus on being an 'all rounder', and the provision of a wide range of extra-curricular activities to help foster this goal, do seem to have been characteristic of the English schools of this period.

6. These snapshots of school life at that time highlight the important role that was played by these late colonial era schools in nurturing a generation of individuals who were up to the formidable task of building the newly independent nation of Malaysia. The successful lives and careers of many of the contributors to 'Legends, Lessons and Love', let alone Professors Jamilah and Khoo Kay Kim themselves, provide ample evidence of the quality of the education they received. Whatever the broader objectives and impact of the colonial period, perhaps we can at least give some credit to the network of schools that was established during this time. These not only provided a solid academic grounding for their students, but also imparted various other important characteristics and ethics, which were perhaps equally important in equipping them for the life of service and nation-building that many of them have led.



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7. The book provides rich detail on the various aspects of this traditional British education model, with its discipline that was kind but firm, and the leading-by-example by the teachers and successive principals, who fulfilled their roles in moulding the new generation with such dedication. Many of these had themselves benefited from the same system, with some coming up from Singapore and elsewhere, while many of those they trained at GEST then also chose a career in teaching. The school sought to build confidence and ambition among all its students, as part of an approach that emphasized service, duty, honesty and integrity. The prefect system was used to develop leadership qualities among youth from diverse backgrounds, while sport offered another avenue to excel through hard work and commitment. The educational philosophy of GEST is summed up very elegantly in the school's simple motto of 'Seek, Serve, Strive'.

8. The success of the school in inculcating these desirable qualities among its students can be seen in the careers of service followed by the author and so many of her peers. During the earlier part of this period, the majority went into government service itself in some form, whether as the police, customs officers, teachers and academics of the author's own family, or performing the numerous other tasks involved in the development of the newly-independent nation after the British left. The private sector became a growing source of employment into the 1960s



and beyond, but this work also represented service of the new nation, as Malaysians gradually replaced the colonial-era staff in private companies too. As the author puts it, ‘there were openings for anyone hard-working enough’.

9. One of the keys to the success of Professor Jamilah and her peers in both the public and private spheres was of course their English-speaking abilities. Thanks again to the efforts of the teachers, students learned how to express themselves effectively in writing and in public speaking. Elocution classes and competitions, acting, and even conversations during the regular social and sporting events, all contributed to the strong grasp of the English language among the students at that time. This in turn provided another important means of social mobility for students from all backgrounds.

10. As well as the education system, the broader context of society and nation also enabled the author and others of her generation to flourish and to serve the country so well. Family and community provided the backdrop for the otherwise all-encompassing school life as well as its backbone, with traditional family values an important part of the disciplined structure that the book describes. Strong traditional values were found in all the cultures present in Tapah and the surrounding area at that time, which included local and migrant Malays, the latter mainly from Sumatra and Java; Ceylonese, Tamils and Punjabis; as well as Chinese, many of whom of course had also settled in Perak. Orang Asli



were also represented among the GEST students and as contributors to the book.

11. We are reminded constantly in the book about the different ways in which multi-culturalism was experienced back then, before the manipulation of racial or religious difference for political purposes that has become a feature of our politics since. As described by the author and her contemporaries, and as depicted in the many photos in the book, multi-culturalism consisted of the easy mingling of classmates from all these different racial and religious backgrounds, who met as equals on the school grounds. Friendships were then deepened through the many opportunities for inter-action and integration that were provided by the school and broader community. This included the exchange of food at festivals and on other occasions, as is so characteristic of Malaysia. As one of the author's former classmates recalls, 'In our time, we never labelled friends as Malay or Chinese or Indian or Eurasian. They were just people'.

12. Alongside this perhaps more uncomplicated interaction between our various constituent races and peoples than what is found today, the book describes a world in which gender and class divides were also easily bridged within the close-knit community that existed around the school and its students. Academic, sports and social events included both sexes and students from all backgrounds in an atmosphere of



mutual respect. All were committed to these values, and any of them could benefit from the opportunity to make something of themselves, and to make a contribution to their evolving society. This included girls, who appear to have been reasonably represented, according to the photos in the book.

13. The author and her sisters, all of whom went on to have illustrious careers, benefited further from having an explicitly feminist mother. Her vision and values clearly also had a formative role in shaping the ambition and the disciplined achievement of it by her daughters. The important academic contribution that has been made by the author to understanding the role of women in development, including here in Malaysia, is firmly grounded in this early training. As she puts it, 'I was never socialized to be subservient to any man'. Her lifelong interest in sociology and in poverty were also spurred by the upbringing depicted in the book, and by the respect and compassion that it instilled in the author.

14. As well as providing such illuminating insight into this crucial transitional period and the lives of some of the individuals who lived through it, this historical portrait of small town Tapah and its school contains important lessons for the present, as the author is keen to emphasize. Even as we are reshaping our current educational models in order to benefit from, and keep up with, all the latest technological



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innovations, we must not forget to appreciate the value of the approaches that have worked well in the past. The discipline, dedication and sense of duty that were imparted by this and other English-medium schools and their small-town communities all remain invaluable qualities today. As does the command of the English language that was enjoyed as an unquestionable right by that generation.

15. Today's educationalists would do well to read this and other books that describe the system in place during this period, to see which of its features might still have relevance and utility. We can also learn much about community and multi-culturalism from this richly detailed account of how these operated in those days. While we may not be able to return to that more innocent small-town past that this book so powerfully brings to life, there may again be valuable elements that we could learn from and that could contribute to our current efforts to build a harmonious multi-cultural society.

16. All in all, 'Legends, Lessons and Love' is an insightful and delightful read which I highly recommend, both for the entertaining and varied perspectives provided by the numerous contributors, as well as for the wise guiding voice of the author herself.



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17. It is with the greatest pleasure that I now launch the book 'Legends, Lessons and Love: a small town and a British school' by Professor Jamilah Ariffin.