

Publication: CNA Online

Date: 5 June 2019

Headline: Commentary: This Hari Raya Puasa and Dragon Boat Festival, open homes to friends of other religions and cultures

Commentary: This Hari Raya Puasa and Dragon Boat Festival, open homes to friends of other religions and cultures

Singapore's religious festivals allow us to celebrate diversity and common values, says Professor Lily Kong.



A previous Ramadan event organised by the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS). (Photo: MUIS)

SINGAPORE: This week, Singaporeans will celebrate two festivals – Hari Raya Puasa, a religious festival for the Muslim community, and Duan Wu Jie, a cultural festival commemorated by the Chinese community.

Festivals are among the most visible of rituals and celebrations, often taking on public expression. This is true of religious and cultural festivals, which, additionally, also often evidence a domestic dimension, celebrated within homes just as they transcend the walls of churches, temples, mosques and other houses of worship.

Festivals are occasions when participants express and enact their identities, whether ethnic, religious, cultural, national, or on the basis of some other commonality, such as locality or shared interest.

In celebrating festivals, we are reminded of common histories and heritages, shared beliefs, collective experiences, mutual interests and/or community ideals.

Publication: CNA Online

Date: 5 June 2019

Headline: Commentary: This Hari Raya Puasa and Dragon Boat Festival, open homes to friends of other religions and cultures



File photo of Hari Raya cookies.

FESTIVALS AN INTEGRAL PART OF AN ETHNIC IDENTITY

In a 2017 survey by CNA and the Institute of Policy Studies, festivals were found to be an integral part of the ethnic identity of many Singaporeans.

Nearly 92 per cent of Chinese, 96 per cent of Malays, and 88 per cent of Indians regarded their main festival – Chinese New Year, Hari Raya Puasa, and Deepavali respectively – as important to their ethnic identity.

In as much as festivals are expressions of our identities and evoke social memories, they may also reflect collective, if partial, amnesia. This is apparent when we repeat traditions and practices without recollecting origins or reflecting on identities and meanings.

While some of us may recall learning about Qu Yuan and the lessons of allegiance and fealty, thought to be the originating reason for rice dumplings (zongzi) and Duan Wu Jie, how many of us are aware of the alternative originating story, anchored in the person of Cao'e, the Han dynasty girl who was said to have drowned looking for her father in the river in Zhejiang Province, now named after her?

As we enjoy the zongzi, with the myriad ways of localising and modernising the taste (think nonya chang, chicken curry zongzi and durian zongzi), do we reflect on the values of fealty and filial piety?

Publication: CNA Online

Date: 5 June 2019

Headline: Commentary: This Hari Raya Puasa and Dragon Boat Festival, open homes to friends of other religions and cultures



A little girl makes dumplings at the Sun Yat-Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall in celebration of the Dumpling Festival.

As we celebrate Hari Raya Puasa, do we realise that it is not the Muslim new year, and contemplate and honour instead the values of empathy, will power and self-control? Festivals deserve to be the occasion for reflection at least as much as for celebration.

DIVERSE FESTIVALS TESTAMENT TO MULTICULTURALISM

Just as festivals have the potential to bind and bond followers, creating in-group identities and building bonding social capital, they could as well serve to divide.

What if a non-Muslim refuses to, and prohibits others from, greeting a Muslim “Selamat Hari Raya”? What if eating zongzi and participating in dragon boat races is condemned as heretic, and the gift of a rice dumpling is rejected?

A cohesive society requires both bonding and bridging social capital. Whereas bonding social capital refers to relationships within a community or a group, bridging social capital describes relationships between social groups – groups that differ on the basis of race, religion, culture, class, gender, nationality and so on.

Political scientist Robert Putman wrote in his book, *Bowling Alone*, that bonding social capital allows a society to “get by”, but to “get ahead”, bridging social capital is critical.

That two very different religious and cultural festivals can be celebrated in the same week in the same place is a testament to Singapore’s diversity, multi-culturalism, and multi-religiosity.

Publication: CNA Online

Date: 5 June 2019

Headline: Commentary: This Hari Raya Puasa and Dragon Boat Festival, open homes to friends of other religions and cultures



Believed to date back to more than 2,000 years, when it started in south-central China, the ancient sport of dragon boat racing retains many ceremonial and religious overtones AFP/PHILIPPE LOPEZ

Around the world, we see religious, ethnic and cultural divides widen with dire consequences. The violent attacks in Christchurch and Sri Lanka have left a devastating impact, and it will take a long time for the affected communities to heal.

We need to ensure that we remain open as a society, that cross-cultural engagement is supported and enabled on an everyday basis, and that we take a stand against behaviour that is disrespectful and unaccepting of others.

Festivals are just the occasion to reflect upon what it means to be human, to learn about our heritages, to reflect on the values they stand for, and to reach across communities, promoting greater shared understanding, and ultimately building a stronger, more cohesive society.

They provide perfect opportunities for wider engagement and interactions with other religious and cultural communities. To do so requires that we begin with opening our homes to neighbours and friends of other religions and cultures.

Festivals can be a key touchpoint for inter-religious and inter-cultural engagement.

Publication: CNA Online

Date: 5 June 2019

Headline: Commentary: This Hari Raya Puasa and Dragon Boat Festival, open homes to friends of other religions and cultures



Deepavali lights seen along Serangoon Road. (Photo: Ainslee Asokan)

Particularly as divisive and inflammatory rhetoric can now quickly spread via social media and cause damage, the opportunity for in-person everyday engagements and regular experience of shared celebrations can be foundational in building genuine relationships across religions and cultures, accentuating common values while dispelling unhealthy stereotypes about the “other”.

MORE NEEDED TO BUILD STRONG INTERCOMMUNAL TIES

Building strong intercommunal ties will require concerted efforts and leadership by policymakers and community leaders.

It will also require that we are discursively engaged, such as through the upcoming International Conference on Cohesive Societies (ICCS) where 700 international delegates from academia, government, religious groups and civil society will gather to listen to a keynote by His Majesty King Abdullah II ibn Al-Hussein of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, who has been a global leader in promoting interfaith understanding and dialogue across religious communities.

Above all, fundamentally, strong intercommunal relationships will depend on our own willingness to open our doors to others and welcome them into our homes.

In this week of two festivals, let us wish our Muslim friends “Selamat Hari Raya” while enjoying a zongzi or two, remembering that the values they underscore are common across religion and culture.

Professor Lily Kong is the President of Singapore Management University.