

Unity Week Opens Young Minds To Malaysia's Cultural Diversity

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Kuala Lumpur: Her five-year-old son's barrage of questions during their visit to the National Unity Week (SMP) 2026 event at Stadium Likas here opened Michelle Michael Foo's eyes to the importance of exposing children to Malaysia's rich ethnic diversity from an early age.

According to BERNAMA News Agency, the 36-year-old homemaker from Papar watched her son's excitement grow as they explored the exhibition zone showcasing the uniqueness of traditional ethnic houses, villages, and games, as well as community heritage displays, each highlighting its own unique identity. "I feel that children today have very little exposure to the cultures of other ethnic groups," she told Bernama. Describing SMP as a highly beneficial initiative, Michelle said first-hand cultural experiences leave a lasting impression on children because not only do they listen to the explanations but also get to participate and create meaningful memories.

The four-day SMP 2026 event in Kota Kinabalu in June was part of the National Unity Week celebration, under the Kembara Perpaduan Malaysia MADANI framework, organised by the Ministry of National Unity to foster cultural understanding and strengthen harmony among Malaysia's diverse ethnic communities. This year's National Unity Week celebration, held from April to June and themed 'Bersama Membina Negara Bangsa' (Building the Nation Together), covered six zones nationwide.

Michelle believes programmes such as National Unity Week play a vital role in nurturing understanding and unity among Malaysia's many races and ethnic groups. "We don't have many large-scale events like this that bring together diverse communities. My son kept asking questions when we visited the exhibition. Thankfully, the information panels helped answer many of them," she said.

One of the event's highlights was the Rumah KAMI exhibition, featuring the traditions and cultures of 14 ethnic groups, including the Murut, Kadazan, Rungus, Bajau, Bugis, Kedayan, Chetti, and Portuguese. Meanwhile, the Ethnic Village showcased replicas of traditional Malay, Chinese, Indian, Baba Nyonya, and Siamese homes, faithfully recreated to reflect the architecture, lifestyle, and customs of the respective communities. Michelle said the traditional games section was equally captivating, allowing visitors of all ages to experience games played by the older generations in the past.

For Suriati Nadi, 43, from Kota Kinabalu, the event offered a rare opportunity to experience Baba Nyonya, or Peranakan Chinese, culture. The preschool teacher, who attended with her five-year-old daughter, said it broadened her understanding of Malaysia's cultural landscape as she has yet to travel to Peninsular Malaysia. "It's my first time seeing the customs and traditional attire of the Baba Nyonya community up close," she said.

She and her daughter also visited the Siamese House, where they sampled the community's traditional cuisine. Their excitement continued as they explored replicas of Chinese and Indian houses. They also witnessed demonstrations of traditional handicrafts, including linangkit embroidery, ribu-ribu weaving, tekak embroidery, and wau-making, and were introduced to traditional musical instruments such as the kompang, gendang, tabla, sape, sitar, and gong. The atmosphere grew even livelier when the central courtyard of the Ethnic Village hosted a traditional Malaysian game, baling selipar (slipper tossing). "The moment I saw the game, I was instantly reminded of my childhood. We used to play baling selipar all the time," Suriati said.

She said cultural and heritage-based programmes serve as important platforms for introducing the beauty of various ethnic traditions, particularly to younger generations. She believes many young Malaysians, including those in Sabah, still have limited exposure to the country's cultural diversity because they grow up within the familiar surroundings of their own communities. As a result, many have little opportunity to interact with peers from different cultural backgrounds. "With National Unity Week, young people don't just learn about Sabah's ethnic diversity. They discover the cultures of communities across Malaysia," she said, adding that such exposure helps foster tolerance, mutual respect, and stronger social harmony.

Government employee Fareha Akub, 27, from Keningau, described the event as a golden opportunity for locals to experience cultures that are seldom showcased in the state. Recalling her visit to the Siamese House, she said she enjoyed tasting somtam, a traditional dish she found both delicious and well-suited to local tastes.

Meanwhile, in his address at the SMP 2026 event here, National Unity Minister Datuk Aaron Ago Dagang said unity cannot be achieved through a single event alone, but requires continuous, consistent, and comprehensive efforts. "Unity is an ongoing commitment that must be nurtured and strengthened over time," he said. Aaron noted that the more than 40 activities organised throughout the nationwide National Unity Week celebration had created meaningful platforms for integration and shared civic spaces – environments where people from diverse backgrounds could meet, interact, and build mutual understanding in a harmonious setting. He expressed confidence that National Unity Week would further strengthen the spirit of togetherness among Malaysians and serve as a catalyst in building a united, harmonious, and prosperous nation.

Meanwhile, Universiti Malaysia Sabah Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities (Research, Innovation and Commercialisation) deputy dean Associate Prof Dr Syahrudin Awang Ahmad said early exposure to ethnic and cultural diversity plays a crucial role in shaping an individual's mindset and positive character as they grow into adulthood. He said this is in line with Gordon Allport's findings in his study of the contact hypothesis, which posits that early interaction among members of different ethnic groups can help reduce prejudice and negative stereotypes by giving children the opportunity to understand the norms, traditions, and values practised by communities of different races.

"When children are exposed to various celebrations, languages, and daily practices from a young age, they naturally grow up perceiving cultural differences not as something unfamiliar but as unique qualities that enrich society. This open-mindedness strengthens tolerance and mutual respect as they become accustomed to communicating and working together across ethnic boundaries, thereby supporting national integration, reducing the potential for racial conflict, and contributing to a harmonious society," he said.

He also believes that direct learning approaches are more effective in introducing cultural diversity to children as they allow them to learn through active participation, in line with David Kolb's experiential learning theory as outlined in his 1984 study. Syahrudin added that programmes such as National Unity Week are ideal platforms but could be enhanced by transforming passive presentations into collaborative activities, whereby children from different ethnic backgrounds can participate in making handicrafts and taking part in traditional games and sports, among others. "Cultural immersion programmes or interactive storytelling sessions could also be introduced to enable children to share their personal experiences," he said, adding that the involvement of parents and local communities, particularly in activities involving the preparation of traditional dishes, could further strengthen support for unity efforts.