

UNITY AND DIVERSITY

Important Figures Who Shaped Our Independent Nation

By Hiranmayii Awli Mohanan

As we approach Malaysia's 65th Independence Day, we take a look back at the important figures, our forefathers, who united as one, regardless of race and religion against the colonial power and peacefully shaped our independent nation today.



Fathers of Malaysia's Independence

TUNKU ABDUL RAHMAN PUTRA ALHAJ

Tunku Abdul Rahman was chief minister of the Federation of Malaya, the first prime minister of an independent Malaya and the prime minister of Malaysia. He was regarded as the "Father of the Nation."

Tunku Abdul Rahman was born on February 8, 1903, in Alor Setar, Kedah, in Malaya, a country then under British control. He was the twentieth child of Sultan Abdul Hamid Halim Shah and Che Manjalara, the sultan's fourth wife. In 1913, he went to study at Debsirin School in Bangkok, and in 1919, he was awarded a scholarship to further his studies at Cambridge University. After a lengthy trip from Singapore aboard a cargo ship, during which he contracted malaria, Tunku disembarked in the village of Little Stukeley, England. He graduated from Cambridge in 1925 and returned in 1926 for an honours degree in law. He sat for the bar exam in 1930 but failed to complete a section of the test and therefore did not pass on this first try.

In 1931, Abdul Rahman received an appointment as a cadet to the Kedah civil service and was later an assistant district officer in Kulim. In 1933, he passed the cadet's law exam on his first attempt, and finally, in 1939, he retook the English bar exam he had failed nine years before and passed. In 1949, he was



Tunku Abdul Rahman (Image Source: The Famous People)



Tunku Abdul Rahman upon returning from London, greeted by cheering citizens

called to the bar and was then named deputy public prosecutor in the Malayan Federal Legal Department, a position he left in 1951 to embark upon a political career.

Abdul Rahman became president of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and spearheaded the alliance between the UMNO and the Malayan Chinese Association (1951) and that of the UMNO and the Malayan Indian Congress (1955). His Alliance Party won a sweeping majority in the election of 1955, and Abdul Rahman became the first chief minister of Malaya. In August, he used his first broadcast as chief minister to declare his determination in seeking independence from Britain without bloodshed.

In January 1956, Abdul Rahman led a mission to London to negotiate for Malayan independence, in the end securing immediate self-government for Malaya and the promise of independence by August 1957. That promise was kept, and Abdul Rahman became independent Malaya's first prime minister (a post he would retain when the Federation of Malaysia, which consolidated the countries of Malaya, Singapore, Sabah, and Sarawak under one umbrella, was formed in 1963). At midnight on August 30, he stood at the flagpole in Merdeka Square, in Kuala Lumpur, when the Union Jack was lowered for the last time and the new Federation flag was raised. In September 1970, with his power slipping and Singapore gone from the Federation for five years, Abdul Rahman relinquished his post as prime minister. He died in 1990 at the age of 87.

TUN TAN CHENG LOCK

Tun Dato' Tan Cheng Lock, a Malaysian patriot and the founder of the MCA, was born on April 5, 1883, in Malacca, Straits Settlements, and passed away on December 8, 1960, in Malacca, Malaya.

Tan Cheng Lock, who was born into a well-to-do Straits Chinese family with interests in shipping and plantations, benefited early from the expansion of Malaya's economy under British control. He made investments in rubber and banking in particular. Additionally, he developed a deep familiarity with the old European thinkers, and in later years, he frequently drew on this knowledge to invigorate his political speeches. During World War I, he initially entered politics through the Straits Chinese British Association. He was then appointed to the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements in 1923, where he quickly established himself as the most outspoken of the local Chinese leaders. He advocated for a unified (and eventually self-governing) Malayan society in which all ethnic groups, both indigenous and migrant, would have equal rights. He was elected to the Straits Settlements Executive Council in 1933, becoming the first Asian to hold the position. This may have been in part due to his support of the government's ban on the Kuomintang the year before and his vehement assertion that Malayan Chinese should only have allegiance to Malaya.

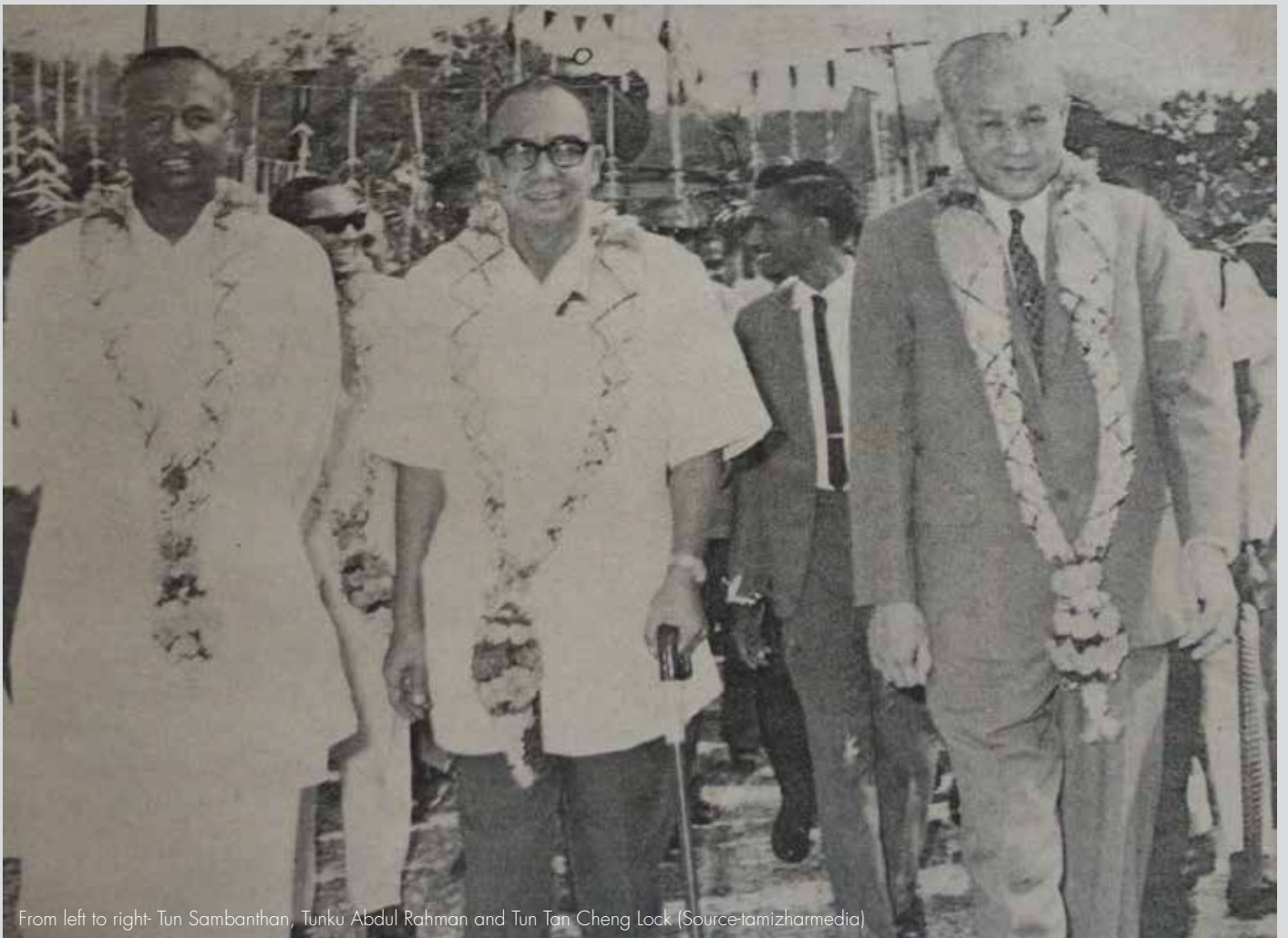


Tun Tan Cheng Lock Image source - Google Arts & Culture



Tunku Abdul Rahman and Tun Tan Cheng Lock (Source-Cilisos)

Tan Cheng Lock established an Overseas Chinese Association to influence British post-war plans during the Japanese occupation, which he experienced in India. It is likely that this organisation was more focused on economic reparations than on political issues, though. With the Malayan Union plan, the British came back to Malaya, a unitary state with a single citizenship was envisaged. The strategy was similar to Tan Cheng Lock, and the Malays rejection of it led Tan Cheng Lock more directly into politics, where he occasionally allied himself with oddballs like the left-wing coalition known as the All-Malaya Council for Joint Action. Tan Cheng Lock was one of a select group of politically secure individuals who began participating in the British-sponsored Communities Liaison Committee in late 1948 after the Communist Emergency broke out in mid-1948, which halted all legal political activity and was intended to lessen intercommunal strife and advance national unification. Tan Cheng Lock was almost certainly going to be chosen to lead the Malayan Chinese Association when it was established in 1949, first as a welfare organisation and later as the first fully-fledged, centrist Malayan Chinese political party. Even after it gained independence in 1957, he continued to serve as its president, albeit more in a ceremonial capacity.



From left to right: Tun Sambanthan, Tunku Abdul Rahman and Tun Tan Cheng Lock (Source-tamizharmedia)

TUN SAMBANTHAN

One of the most well-known Indian leaders active in the Malayan independence movement was Tun Thirunyanasambanthan s/o Veerasamy, also known as V T. Sambanthan and born on June 16, 1919. The native of Sungai Siput was a forerunner in the industry and held a lot of properties. He received his early schooling at Clifford High School in Kuala Kangsar, Perak, where he was well-liked by his classmates for being an intelligent student and an enthusiastic player.

His early political activity, which lasted for almost 25 years, was always based on the idea of harmony in contrast to difference. He served as the fifth President of the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) and one of the country's founding fathers, with Tunku Abdul Rahman and Tan Cheng Lock. He worked in several ministries, including Labour, Health, Works, Posts and Telecommunications, before finishing with the National Unity ministry, from 1955 to 1973, while serving as the president of MIC.

A basic school called the Mahatma Gandhi Tamil School was founded on August 14, 1954, by Tun Sambanthan for the benefit of the pupils who were residing on the estate. The first Indian Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru's younger sister Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit gave the school its ceremonial opening speech. He brought about a number of changes among Indian plantation workers along the route in his own unique way. He supported the implementation of English instruction in Perak Tamil schools as well as the conversion of the South Indian Immigration Labour Fund into an education fund for the offspring of plantation workers.



Tun Sambanthan



Tun Sambanthan in the midst of work

Tun made it a priority to provide public transportation for students who may need to pursue their higher education in the town region, in addition to providing education to children from the rubber estates. He sold about half of his father's 2.4 sq km of rubber land while MIC's president in order to aid the Indian community and raise party funds. This helped the party's financial standing.

The fragmentation of estates, which served as the main source of income for practically all Indian workers, was the MIC's main issue under his leadership. The party encouraged joint efforts to buy estates and thwart staff evacuations in an effort to further the fragmentation. In the midst of party turmoil in 1955, two months before the first federal elections, Tun Sambanthan assumed control of the MIC. Although he didn't always please his fans, he was able to eventually unite a party that had severe internal conflicts. The late Toh Puan Umasundari joined Tun's life in the midst of his political involvement, and the two got married in May 1956.

In order to discuss Malayan independence, which was slated for August 31st, 1957, Tunku Abdul Rahman travelled to London in 1955 along with Tun Tan Cheng Lock and Tun Sambanthan. The rest, as we know it, is history.

ARTISTS ODE TO INDEPENDENCE DAY

BY HIRANMAYII AWLI MOHANAN

It has been well established that art is a medium of self-expression, held to reflect an artist's inner state. It's a space for expression, conversation, and creativity. A piece of art and its existence are always evolving, flexible, and subjective; they heavily depend on the artist and the tool or medium employed to create it. There are many subjects that serve as an artist's muse, be it their surroundings, the goings on in their household or country, experiences, travels, nature and many more. In that regard, as a nod to Malaysia and its independence, various artists have sought to translate their nationalism and love for their country onto canvas, including Awang Damit Ahmad and Dato Tajuddin Ismail. Here, we take a look at individualistic oeuvres of these artists and their 'Merdeka'-themed paintings.

Dato Tajuddin Ismail — Synergy and Diversity

Tajuddin Ismail, also known as Taj, was born in Negeri Sembilan on October 26, 1949. In 1969, he graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts from ITM School of Art & Design. In 1974, the artist earned a degree in graphic design at the Art Centre College of Design in Los Angeles, California. From 1979 to 1981, he studied post-graduate interior architecture at the Pratt Institute in New York. He received a Fulbright Research Fellowship in 1987 from the New York-based American Council of Learned Societies. Taj had also established TJ Fine Art in 2004. After teaching at the University Mara Institute of Technology for several years, he joined Sunway University as its Fine Arts Department Associate Professor and Academic Adviser. It was set up for the purpose of exclusively featuring Tajuddin's works along with those of other chosen contemporary artists from Asia, the USA, South America and Europe.

His Oeuvre

Fundamentals of graphic and architectural design have a significant influence on Taj's paintings, and vice versa. There is no one correct interpretation of the artist's work; instead, viewers can approach it from many different directions and come away with a range of viewpoints. Subjectivity is what gives abstract art its genuine beauty. For every person, it could have a distinct meaning and a different emotional response. Tajuddin remarked, "It may take you to another level, just like music, and increase the meaning, the imagination, and the experience." A piece of writing becomes more captivating and compelling as a result. His artwork is never straightforward; he always manages to pique curiosity and entice the audience to analyse the significance of his abstract creations. Tajuddin's works may appear illogical, incoherent, and downright baffling to the uninitiated, yet after thorough consideration, they produce a particular emotion.

It is commonly known that the artist's works are metaphorical mazes with hidden significance. His incredible abstract artwork, which is inspired by natural forms and sceneries, has earned him a reputation for excellence. Many art aficionados have been drawn to his inventive and sophisticated artistic world by his unusual style. Tajuddin believes that the purpose of art is to create a visual link in the viewer's mind. Tajuddin Ismail has a natural talent for creating abstract artwork. The message of abstract art is never consistent; it might imply different things to different people.

The artist was inspired to intentionally use a complicated and structured approach to his works as much as generating content by tapping into his background in design and architecture. Taj looks to painters whose works share a very structured approach with his own, such as Paul Klee, Eduardo Chillida, Richard Diebenkorn, and many more. He seeks to instil a sense of calm and visual order amidst the chaos that life can occasionally



Tajuddin Ismail
"Synergy - Unity and Diversity - Merdeka 50" (2007)
Acrylic on wood panel
Diameter 213 cm

give through the use of structure. The Spanish sculptor Eduardo Chillida, the painter Mark Rothko, Cy Twombly, Robert Rauschenberg, and Latiff Mohidin are some of the outstanding and visionary painters whose works the artist admires and who have had the biggest influence on his works.

Synergy and Diversity

This painting, entitled "Synergy and Diversity," was submitted by Taj for the 2007 exhibition "Merdeka 50: A Celebration of Malaysian Art" to mark Malaysia's 50th anniversary of independence. Tajuddin Ismail's "Synergy, Unity and Diversity" employs a circular format to depict the literal form of unity and the symbolic colours of diversity. Fullness, wholeness, resonance, and harmony are all reverberated by its rounded shape. It provides room for reconciliation, retreat, and resolution of conflicts. Tajuddin lets out the shimmering heat of reds on one side, and the shivering cold of blues on the other. Each colour deprives the other of dominance, shuffling, overlapping and edging. Hence, there is a semblance of balance, in a perpetual state of agitation that characterises any functioning democracy. Tajuddin emits the icy cold of blues on one side and the glistening heat of reds on the other. Each colour denies the other the ability to dominate, move around, overlap, and edge. In a continual state of agitation that characterises any functional democracy, there is thus a semblance of balance. This painting was the embodiment of Taj's nod to Malaysia's independence.



Awang Damit Ahmad
 Malaysia Masa Kini dan Masa Depan, 1987/88
 Acrylic on canvas
 60 x 106 cm

Awang Damit Ahmad — Malaysia Masa Kini dan Masa Depan, 1987-1988

Awang Damit Ahmad is one of Malaysia's most well-known and well-established artists. He was born in Kuala Penyu, Sabah. He relocated to Selangor in 1975 when he was 21 years old to work as a technician for Telekom Malaysia. He nurtured his love of the arts while working as a technician, and in 1979, he left Telekom to enrol in Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM). He completed his practical work in Melaka while pursuing his Diploma in Fine Arts at UiTM, where he also learned from the best in St. Paul Hills, Melaka, to hone his skills. He graduated in 1983 from UiTM at the top of his class.

After earning his master's degree in fine arts from the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC, in 1989, Awang Damit finally started working as a tutor at UiTM. He joined the Arlington Art Group and The Capitol Hill during this time, with expressionist Professor Tom Nakashima serving as his primary inspiration. The artist travelled across America, learned about various facets of art, and earned pocket money.

One of his paintings, *Nyanyian Petani Gunung*, which was awarded the 1991 Salon Malaysia Award, one of the most prestigious art prizes in Malaysia, was acquired by PETRONAS Gallery. His alma mater, UiTM, employed him as a lecturer before appointing him as an associate professor in the faculty in 2000. Prior to it, he held a variety of jobs, including that of department head for fine arts. Despite his involvement in academia, Awang Damit has single-handedly contributed significantly to the growth of the Malaysian art scene.

Awang Damit has held various exhibitions both in groups and solo including the *Intipati Budaya-Satu Sintesis* show at the National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur in 1995, with the artworks also shown at Shenn's Fine Art in Singapore a year earlier. He was also involved with various group exhibitions including the *Bentuk Dan Makna – Galeri Seni FSSR, UiTM Shah Alam*, while shows abroad included the 15th Asia International Art Exhibition, Taipei, Taiwan, *Perception and Perspective: A Malaysian Eye View*, Hotbath and Pitville Art Gallery, London, the 14th Asia International Art Exhibition, Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Japan and *Contemporary Malaysian Artist*, Beijing Art Museum, Beijing, China. Armed with techniques he picked up in the US, Awang Damit completed the lauded series *Marista* (2002) and *Iraga* (2011).

Malaysia Masa Kini dan Masa Depan, 1987-1988

There's much to decipher about this artwork. At first impression, what catches the eye is the artist's iteration of the *Jalur Gemilang* (Malaysian flag) as the backdrop of the work, interrupted by shapes and forms in between, almost as if it's a window to the past. It's bold, potent splatter of colours seem like a reflection and lament of the past, of something long gone, something one remembers with fondness. Awang Damit Ahmad does usually base his abstract art on the emotional and nostalgic memories of his childhood pastimes and places from the past that he holds dear to his heart, declaring, "I am inspired by my childhood experiences, working experiences and my father's background as a fisherman and farmer." Throughout the width of the painting runs a green element that suggests greenery and nature. On the foreground, a puzzle-like template of various images and shapes of dials that make up machinery symbolises the future, as indicated by the title of this painting. This piece evokes a contemplative spirit – it is sombre yet hopeful, serious, earthy and vibrant at the same time, a motif often used by the artist. The abstraction Awang Damit employs to create shapes and bits of patterns are all symbolic, and the way he arranges these shapes and patterns are arbitrary – all of which are derived from his personal observations and musings. This work was also Awang Damit's entry for the BNM Art Competition in 1988 and it won the 2nd prize in the event.