

Citation for
Cecil Rajendra
Malaysian Bar Lifetime Achievement
Award 2019

by Mureli Navaratnam *Member of the Bar*



Let me at the outset say, Cecil is not your garden-variety type of lawyer.

He describes himself as “a lawyer by profession and a poet by compulsion” but he wears many other masks: Cook, footballer, Manchester United supporter, environmentalist, tantrik, human rights activist, barfly, etc.



Cecil aged one, with his great-grandfather and sisters, 1942.

He was born in Penang over seven decades ago and spent the best part of his childhood in the then-fishing village of Tanjong Tokong.

A village, he says, that has been destroyed by so-called “development”.

Fifty years ago he recorded the impending destruction of the village in a poem entitled “The Hills and The Sea”. In 2017, it inspired a gut-wrenching documentary (with the same title) on the plight of displaced fishermen, by award-winning cinematographer Andrew Ng.

Perhaps the roots of Cecil’s instinctive empathy with the less fortunate and privileged can be traced back to that little village of Tanjong Tokong.

Unfortunately, he received his primary and secondary education in St Xavier’s Institution (the second-best school in Penang?) before going on to read law at the University of Malaya in Singapore.

Asked why he chose to do law, he says that as the eldest son in a traditional Indian family, he was given only three options: to be a lawyer, doctor or civil servant! He chose the softest option. As a reluctant law student, Cecil spent most of his university days on the playing field rather than in the library.

He represented the university in athletics, hockey and sepak takraw (another skill



Cecil with his Primary 1 classmates, in St Xavier’s Institution, Penang, 1948.



Cecil's band, "The Ristonians", 1960. He (left) played the tea-chest bass.

he had picked up from the kampong!). After a two-year frolic at the University of Malaya in Singapore, he was despatched to London with the strict instruction to stop mucking about and to complete his law studies within three years!

He enrolled in Lincoln's Inn in 1964. He still had little appetite for law but nevertheless put his shoulder to the wheel and completed his Part I within 18 months.

In 1965 he had his first collection of poems — *Embryo* — published. He was the first Malaysian to have a book of poems published in London.

As a young brown published poet, Cecil now found himself a minor celebrity in London's poetry circles and campuses, and he made the most of it by abandoning his studies altogether and partying non-stop!

But there was mounting pressure from his parents to finish his finals and return home — to practise law, no doubt!

However, London in the 60s was too exciting a city to leave just yet — with the music of The Beatles and The Rolling Stones, The Theatre of Osborne, Wesler and Olivier, The New Cinema of Fellini and Godard ... and those endless wild West

Indian parties fuelled with rum punch, Bob Marley and you know what — which Cecil confesses to.

At a Christmas party in 1966, he met Rebecca and was instantly smitten. Seeing how very different they both are, I was curious as to what brought them together.

Cecil confided that after getting used to girls on campuses going gaga over his poetry, Rebecca seemed totally unimpressed.

It was a challenge — it certainly was! And now, after 53 years they are still together. She is still unimpressed!

Cecil had by now given up his pursuit of law altogether.



With "Embryo", Cecil became the first Malaysian to publish a book of poems in London, 1965.

He spent his late mornings browsing through all the second-hand bookshops in London; his afternoons at classic cinemas (special discounts

for students and Old Age Pensioners); evenings in the theatre at the Proms or in jazz cellars; and the nights rounded off nicely with a couple of pints at a pub or a party.

Weekends were spent demonstrating in Trafalgar Square against the Vietnam War, for the ongoing liberation struggles in Africa, against the dictatorships in

Greece and Argentina, and in support of Nelson Mandela and the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa.

Living in Notting Hill Gate, Cecil was also becoming more and more involved with the growing black consciousness movement in Great Britain.

To keep body and soul together, he worked in several menial jobs including as postman, cook, scriptwriter, messenger boy, factory worker and wine porter (in Selfridges Wine Cellar where he picked up a rudimentary knowledge of fine wines).

He spent his summers bumming around Europe visiting art galleries and bookshops. After a two-year sojourn from law, he returned to Lincoln's Inn to complete his finals in 1968.

In 1969, he returned home (with Rebecca) to explore options. A couple of law firms in Singapore and Malaysia had made offers. Cecil, however, felt he had not yet honed his skills as a writer, and decided to return to London. His parents were furious, and his mother told Rebecca that she could do much better than to marry her son Cecil who was nothing more than a long-haired bum with absolutely no future whatsoever! Rebecca took his mother's warning under advisement ... as they were not yet married then.

On returning to London, Cecil involved himself with a broad range of civil rights groups – Amnesty International, Anti-

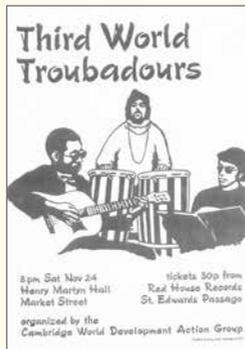


Called to the Bar at Lincoln's Inn, 1968.

Apartheid Movement, National Council for Civil Liberties, and black awareness groups including the Free University of Black Studies in Notting Hill Gate.

He worked as a Legal Officer with the Student Christian Movement ("SCM") and the United Kingdom ("UK") Community Relations Commission ("CRC"). His duties entailed visiting prisons, attending courts, arranging bail, providing legal aid, etc.

In 1970, he founded the historic **Black Voices** forum in a London coffee house (The Troubadour) that hosted a galaxy of Third World activities, writers, poets and musicians.



In the same year, he formed the Third World Troubadours – a group that used poetry and music to bear witness to the situation in developing countries – with Helio Diaz Pinto (from Brazil) and Cecil Roberts (from Sierra Leone). The Third World Troubadours performed extensively in the UK, and were featured on the British Broadcasting Corporation ("BBC") and the *New Internationalist*, after which they were deluged with requests to perform in Canada, the United States of America, Europe and Australia.

Slip-up cleared, so lawyer admitted to the Bar

PENANG, Wed. — The Bar Council withdrew an objection against the admittance of a lawyer to the Bar today after an explanation and a typing error in the affidavit was made.

The lawyer, Mr. Cecil Rajendra, whose petition was moved by Mr. Lim Kean Chye, was later admitted to the Bar.

The council had objected to Mr. Rajendra's period in chambers, which, according to the affidavit, was short of the one year requirement.

Mr. Lim then informed the court that there was a typing error in the affidavit with reference to the dates during which Mr. Rajendra had read in chambers. Mr. Justice Gunn Chit Thye then admitted Mr. Rajendra.

Mr. Rajendra, a poet and art critic, completed his Bar finals at Lincoln's Inn, London, in 1968 and worked as legal adviser in London before returning to Malaysia last year.

He has been active in cultural and theatre affairs since his return. He has published three collections of poems and a fourth collection is due early next year.

Another lawyer, Mr. M. Mohan, 26, was also admitted to the Bar today. His petition was moved by Mr. R. Thilainmuthu.

A former student of the St. Xavier's here, Mr. Mohan went to Britain in 1973 and was admitted to the Middle Temple.

He obtained the LL.B. (Hons) from the University of London in June 1975 and later took up post-graduate studies at Queen Mary College of the University.

Mr. Mohan returned to Penang last year after completing his post-grad practical training at the Council of Legal Education in Britain.

In 1972, Cecil was commissioned to put together the first seminal collection of Third World poetry, *Other Voices, Other Places: An Anthology of 3rd World Poetry*, for use in schools in the UK.

The anthology featured some of the finest poets in Asia, Africa and the West Indies. 1972 was also a historic year in his life. After six long years of courtship, harassment and pestering, Rebecca finally agreed to marry "The Bum".

They were married at the Paddington Registry, followed by a modest luncheon at the Lord's Cricket Ground. Needless to say there was no grand reception but an all-night West Indian-style party with loads of poetry, music and rum punch.

After the birth of their son in December 1975, Cecil and Rebecca returned home in 1976.

He chambered at the firm of Messrs Subbiah & Co under Dato' T Subbiah, then-MIC State Chairman and State Exco Councillor.

Lim Kean Chye, a legendary lawyer of the Malaysian Bar, offered to move his call in 1977. However, the Bar Council and the Attorney General's Chambers objected to his call. Lim, at the height of his prowess, lambasted both the Bar Council and the Attorney General's Chambers, which meekly withdrew their objections and Cecil was finally admitted. But I'll let Cecil himself tell you more of that story ...

In 1980, with the support of a couple of lawyers, two farmers and a social worker, he initiated the first rural legal aid clinic in the country — the Penang Legal

Advisory Centre ("PLAC"). PLAC took up several groundbreaking cases of farmers, fishermen and factory workers, long before implementation of the Malaysian Bar's Legal Aid Scheme in 1983.

The modest PLAC module — established in a wooden shack in the village of Bayan Lepas — was highly commended by the Commonwealth Legal Education Association and the International Bar Association, and he was invited to initiate legal aid programmes in Cambodia, East Africa, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand!

I first got to know Cecil when I was a chamberie in Messrs Presgrave & Matthews and was despatched by my Chamber Master, Dato' Ghazi Ishak, to assist Cecil in a murder inquest in the remote Magistrates' Court in Balik Pulau. It proved to be both an instructive and hilarious experience.

After a long hot day in court, Cecil invited me to have a glass of wine with his close friend, Professor K J Ratnam — then-Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Universiti Sains Malaysia.



Cecil relaxing in his chambers, 1980.



(Top): The wooden shack that served as PLAC, 1980; (Below): Cecil with one of PLAC's first clients, 1980.



We have been sharing the occasional bottle of wine ever since.

Cecil then got himself elected (by ballot) to the Bar Council. He was the first Penangite to break the Kuala Lumpur hegemony. He soon assumed Chairmanship of the Bar Council National Legal Aid Committee and went around the country with the likes of Puravalen Muthu Raman and Sivarasa Rasiah, urging every state to open a legal aid centre.

Cecil firmly believes legal aid is a fundamental human right and not a matter of charity.

In 1984, he organised the first National Legal Aid Conference at the Royal Selangor Club. He also prompted the Bar Council and Biro Bantuan Guaman to host the first two international legal aid conferences in Kuala Lumpur. In addition, he has served several terms as the Chairperson of the Bar Council Human Rights Committee.

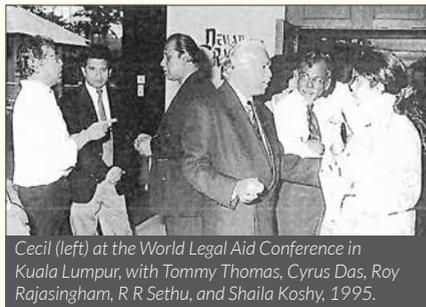
Under his stewardship, the Bar Council Human Rights and Legal Aid Committees

took up several groundbreaking cases pertaining to the rights of indigenous peoples (such as the *Sagong Tasi* case), dispossessed persons (Re: *Kampung Buah Pala*) and migrant workers (Re: *Halimah*).

During his tenure, he also initiated several law awareness campaigns, most notably “Save the Judiciary” in 1988; “No Detention Without Trial (“NDWT”)”, calling for the abolition of the Internal Security Act 1960 and all forms of legislation that allowed for detention without trial; and “The Rights on Arrest”. He was the driving force behind the Bar Council’s “Festival of Rights” that commemorated Human Rights Day (10 December).

Also, in Penang, he inaugurated the James Richardson Logan Memorial Lecture. James Logan was an exemplary Scottish lawyer who represented the rights of local people against the British colonial administration. Logan is the only lawyer in Malaysia or Singapore who has a memorial erected in his honour by the indigents.

In 2000, Cecil launched the country’s first mobile legal aid clinic (van).



Under his stewardship, the Bar Council Human Rights and Legal Aid Committees



I also had another close encounter with Cecil in 2000 when I was asked by my then-Senior Partner, Dato' Ghazi Ishak, to be present at Cecil's interrogation by the Special Branch. He had written a poem, "The Kingdom of Purplaya", that some extremists had deemed seditious, and they had lodged a police report against him. This was the third time he had been pulled up for questioning by the authorities.

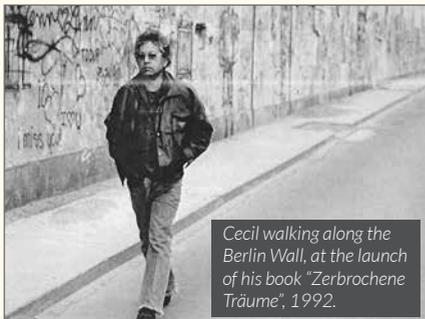


His poems have appeared, *inter alia*, in *Time*, *National Geographic*, *Asiaweek*, *Asia Magazine*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *New Statesman*, *The Asahi Shimbun*, *The Guardian*, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, and in United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees ("UNHCR"), United Nations Children's Fund ("UNICEF"), BBC, WCC and World Wildlife Fund ("WWF") publications. They also continuously pop up in school textbooks, General Certificate of Secondary Education ("GCSE") test papers, church tracts, environmental publications, human rights studies, etc.

Cecil has authored 25 books, including *No Bed of Roses: The Rose Chan Story*. His poems have been published in over 50 countries and translated into several languages including German, French, Chinese, Tamil, Tagalog and Esquimaux!

Such is the power and reach of his poems that in 1993, the Government impounded his passport to prevent him from presenting his environmental poems abroad. His poem – "Requiem for a Rainforest" – was considered a threat to our timber industry! After an outcry in four continents, his passport was

His famous parody of so-called security laws – "The Animal and Insect Act" – garnered over three million hits on the Internet and was adopted by Amnesty International for their 1995 Diary and 1996 Calendar.



summarily returned to him. "Requiem for a Rainforest" is now taught in Malaysian schools.

Cecil is (was) an avid sportsman. On his admission to the Bar, he started the Penang Bar's first football team, which he captained in 1977. He represented the Penang Bar and Malaysian Bar at various Bar Games in the 70s and 80s.

On the insistence of Raja Aziz Addruse, he served as President of the National Human Rights Society ("HAKAM") for two terms.

In 2004, he was the first recipient of the Malaysian Lifetime Humanitarian Award.

In 2011, he received a DIVA (Danish International Visiting Artists) Award from the Arts Council of Denmark, in recognition of his poems about ecological devastation and climate change.

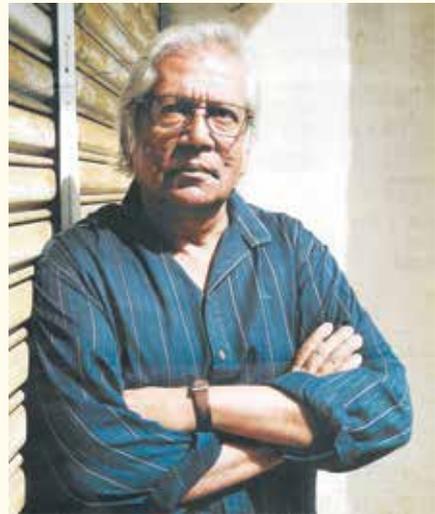
In 2012, he received an Individual Human Rights Award from the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia ("SUHAKAM").

In 2015, he was declared a "Living Heritage Treasure" by the Penang Heritage Trust ("PHT").

And today, we are here to present to him ... the Malaysian Bar Lifetime Achievement Award!



Cecil has served as honorary legal adviser of the Spastic Children's Centre since 1980, and organises fund-raising tea dances for the Centre.



Malaysian Bar Lifetime Achievement Award

The Bar Council instituted the Malaysian Bar Lifetime Achievement Award in 2011 as a form of recognition of and appreciation for outstanding Members of the Malaysian Bar who have demonstrated particular dedication and exemplary lifetime service, and made invaluable and outstanding contributions, to the Bar.

The Animal and Insect Act

by Cecil Rajendra, "Refugees & Other Despairs", 1980

Finally, in order to ensure absolute national security
they passed the Animal & Insect Emergency Control & Discipline Act.

Under this new Act, buffaloes cows and goats were prohibited
from grazing in herds of more than three.
Neither could birds flock, nor bees swarm ...
This constituted unlawful assembly.

As they had not obtained prior planning permission,
mud-wasps and swallows were issued with summary Notices to Quit.
Their homes were declared subversive extensions to private property.

Monkeys and mynchs were warned to stop relaying their noisy morning orisons
until an official Broadcasting Licence was issued by the appropriate Ministry.
Unmonitored publications and broadcasts posed the gravest threats
in times of a National Emergency.

Similarly, woodpeckers had to stop tapping their morse-code messages
from coconut tree-top to chempaka tree.
All messages were subject to a thorough pre-scrutiny by the relevant authorities.

Java sparrows were arrested in droves for rumour-mongering.
Cats (suspected of conspiracy) had to be indoors by 9 o'clock.
Cicadas and crickets received notification to turn their amplifiers down.
Ducks could not quack nor turkeys gobble during restricted hours.
Need I say, all dogs – alsatians, dachshunds, terriers,
pointers and even little chihuahuas – were muzzled.

In the interests of security penguins and zebras
were ordered to discard their non-regulation uniforms.
The deer had to surrender their dangerous antlers.
Tigers and all carnivores with retracted claws
were sent directly to prison for concealing lethal weapons.

And by virtue of Article Four, paragraph 2(b) sub-Subsection sixteen,
under no circumstances were elephants allowed to break wind
between the hours of six and six.
Their farts could easily be interpreted as gunshot. Might spark off a riot

A month after the Act was properly gazetted
the birds and insects started migrating south, the animals went north
and an eerie silence handcuffed the forests.

There was now Total Security.