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Malaysia from A to Z

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HAVE you ever wondered how the Dewan Negara (or Senate) works? Or what the political and economic transformation of the nation has meant to its people?

Perhaps you have wondered about the significance of the Malay Sultanates, marvelled at the traditional dance-drama Mak Yong, and wished you could know more about them.

Well, ponder no more. Help is on the way, and I mean in a BIG way - 15 volumes of 1,100 double-paged, self-contained articles with nearly 10,000 illustrations, to be exact.

All these strung together in more than one million words. A postscript to the 15 volumes will be an Atlas of Malaysia.

When completed, The Encyclopedia of Malaysia will embrace the most up-to-date information reflecting the history, politics, economics, geography, culture and natural wealth of one of South-East Asia's most vibrant and diverse countries.

This is the task being fashioned by a team of experienced, dedicated and far-sighted people under the guidance of a distinguished editorial advisory board headed by Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

The other members of the board are Tan Sri Datuk Dr Ahmad Mustaffa Babjee, Professor Datuk Dr Asmah Haji Omar, Puan Azah Aziz, Dr Peter Kedit, Datuk Dr T. Marimuthu, Datuk Dr Noordin Sopiee, Tan Sri Datuk Dr Augustin S.H. Ong, Datuk Zakiah Hanum Abdul Hamid and Patricia Regis. The late Tan Sri Zain Azraai was also on the board.

An ambitious multi-volume work, The Encyclopedia of Malaysia is being produced by Editions Didier Millet, an established publisher of quality illustrated non-fiction for the international market.

The publisher's previous Malaysian collaboration include Malaysia: Heart of Southeast Asia and The Crafts of Malaysia.

"What we have in the encyclopaedia market currently is more the traditional type where the text takes up more space than the pictures.

In The Encyclopedia of Malaysia, the concept is more pictorial and illustrative, with lots of photographs, artwork, diagrams and maps.

"People don't like to read large chunks of text and we believe pictures are a powerful way to convey information. On the average, every page has about 10 photographs and illustrations," says project manager Datin Noor Azlina Yunus, who has 16 years of experience in publishing academic and general books on South-East Asia.

The encyclopaedia project is a multi-million ringgit investment and the result of years of hard work by a large pool of Malaysian authors, academicians, photographers and illustrators.

Much of its groundwork has been undertaken by Datin Seri Marina Mahathir, who has been responsible for finding sponsors and identifying candidates for the Editorial Advisory Board. The first meeting of the board took place in March 1994. On October 20 of the same year, Anwar publicly announced the project, and eight months later a ceremony was held to thank the first 10 corporate sponsors.

Over the next 18 months, the focus was on appointing and briefing volume editors, drawing up volume outlines and contracting authors.

In June 1996, the board approved the line-up for most of the volumes, and since the latter part of the same year, material has been coming in.

More than 450 contributors, including 17 volume and co-volume editors

are working together to produce the reference work that will be a treasure trove of information for anyone curious to learn about Malaysia.

"The project is aimed at the intelligent layman, not the specialist. Anyone, irrespective of age, will find the encyclopaedia stimulating. Even small children can learn from the pictures and illustrations," Azlina says.

Each volume will contain an average of 30 authors' works, with 65 double page spreads grouped under different themes. The volume editors help draw up the contents and vet the authors' work for factual accuracy and relevancy to local context. Among other day-to-day nitty gritty, the in-house editors edit the text, source for pictures, commission artwork and do research for illustrations.

For Azlina and her team of eight in-house editors and five designers based in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, it has been a challenge to distil specialist knowledge into not more than 1,200 words for each double-page spread. This requires much skill and great command of the subject.

"It is an ambitious and time-consuming project," Azlina says.

And that's not an overstatement. The pages of The Encyclopedia of Malaysia are filled with photographs specially commissioned for the series, illustrations that show not just the appearance of the animals, plants and objects but also what they look like inside, from above and below.

For example, in the volume on Architecture, three-dimensional cutaway illustrations which often take months to conceive and execute, with details of the interior of a Malay house, an Indian temple and Chinese shophouses.

In the volume on Early History, carefully researched reconstruction of historical events like the discovery of the Terengganu Stone will fire the imagination of the curious reader.

Because of the large number of people involved, development costs of The Encyclopedia of Malaysia are high. The estimated price the end-user will have to pay is in the region of US\$50 (RM125) for each volume.

The encyclopaedia will be published in sets of five, the first scheduled for release in March, followed by the second set in November 1998 and the third in June 1999.

"The encyclopaedia is not for retail trade, but will be sold door-to-door by an encyclopaedia specialist whom we have not identified as yet. There will be a Bahasa Malaysia version once the English version is completed," Azlina reveals.

The Encyclopedia of Malaysia will be testament not only to the country's achievements but also to the diversity of natural and human heritage that is at the heart of Malaysia.

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