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Boria comes naturally to Pak Kan

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ABU Bakar Jaafar, better known as "Pak Kan", is almost a legend of Boria, a traditional form of Penang Malay entertainment.

This traditional form of entertainment combines song, dance and satirical sketches staged and performed by the ordinary folk.

And even at 76, there is no better "tukang karang" (lead tenor and composer) in the country to match him in composing verses (pantun) and their key tunes.

Just give him a subject, say "Merdeka" or "nasi kandar" and within seconds, he would reel off a four-line pantun which not only rhymes but is catchy as well.

When asked whether he could "conjure up" a pantun on the Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, this was his response:

"Dr Mahathir orang Aloq Setaq,

Fikirannya waras dan cukup pintaq

Di meja perundingan sikit pun tak gentaq

Jangan siapa-siapa cuba nak putaq."

And of Penang's traditional dish, nasi kandar, this is his tribute:

Masyhur sudah di Pulau Pinang

Nasi kandar sudah tercanang

Karinya sedap minyak berlinang

Lama tak makan duduk tak senang.

Jaafar made his Boria debut as one of the "sailors" in his kampung troupe of Sungai Pinang in 1942.

Ten years later he had established himself as a silver-tongued "tukang karang" leading the troupe to greater heights up to the 1960s.

He recalled working hand in glove with the late Yaakob Syed to come up with unique ideas for Boria performances.

Yaakob went on to become one of the longest serving honorary secretaries of the Football Association of Penang (FAP).

As a young lad growing up in Sungai Pinang, Jaafar was seduced by the wiles and attraction of Boria as his father, Jaafar Mohamad Salleh, a Customs supervisor, was one of the three Boria patrons in the kampung.

"In the 1920s, Boria troupes performed in the patron's compound.

"Boria was very popular as there was not much entertainment in those days," he added.

He recalled that Boria performances then lasted from 7.30pm to dawn.

Jamong (torches made from coconut fronds) and gasoline lamps were in use then.

Apart from Sungai Pinang, the other popular troupes were Jalan Hatin (Hutton Lane) and Tanjung Tokong.

Jaafar attended the Kampung Jawa Malay School before moving to the Almashoor School (then in Tek Soon Street).

This was where he was taught English.

During the Japanese Occupation in 1943, the wily Jaafar managed to escape when the Japanese rounded up several youths to work on the notorious Death Railway at the Siam-Burma border.

"Five friends and I were at the Majestic Cinema watching a film when Japanese soldiers sealed all the exits.

"Somehow I managed to wriggle my way out but my five friends all perished at the railway," he said.

To escape a similar fate, Jaafar joined the police.

In 1946, he joined the Customs and was posted to Port Swettenham, Perai, Tanjung Dawai and Keroh.

He was transferred to Tanjung Dawai, Kedah in 1966 where he was running a "one-man show".

Nothing much was happening here except for some smuggling of Thai tobacco by some local fishermen, he said.

Jaafar was not supplied with any equipment to help him in his work.

He got hold of an old oven and fixed wires to it leading to a tree outside.

When some of these smugglers called at his post and noticed the contraption, he told them it was a wireless set which would enable him to send for help!

"This helped to cut down on the smuggling to a certain extent but I was powerless to do anything during heavy rain when smuggling activities increased," he said.

Jaafar also served at the communist terrorist hotbed, Keroh, Perak for ten years.

Most Customs officers then, he said, would rather resign than accept a posting there.

In 1968, terrorists ambushed a Police Field Force truck at Bukit Berapit and killed 17 Police Field Force personnel.

A Thai Army major who had escaped the ambush made it to town and requested for help to rescue his wife.

His wife had been left behind at the ambush scene.

Jaafar persuaded a colleague, Ishak Shamsuddin, a younger brother of former Cabinet Minister Tan Sri Kadir Shamsuddin, to accompany him to the spot.

"We rushed there on Ishak's scooter and we saw bodies lying around.

"I saw a hand waving in the tall lallang and I knew it must be the major's wife.

"I told Ishak to get ready as I was going to grab her and all three of us would make a quick getaway.

"Ishak was so tensed up that he immediately accelerated when I placed the woman on the scooter.

"This caused me to fall backwards to the amusement of the terrorists who were watching a mere 15 metres away," said Jaafar.

Why didn't the terrorists shoot at them? Jaafar said some terrorists were actually rubber tappers and orchard owners who must have recognised us as Customs officers.

"They had nothing against the Customs and Immigration officers although they viewed the army and police as their enemies.

"Officers in the border areas cannot afford to be too harsh to the locals," he explained.

Jaafar also had a narrow escape in 1974 when a shot from an over-eager Customs officer whistled past his right ear during operations against rice smugglers in Baling.

He retired from the Customs in 1979 after 33 years of service.

He now lives in Sungai Petani with his wife Hafsah Sulaiman. But Jaafar is not idle in retirement.

He is a co-founder of the group, OLJS which stands for Orang Lama Jengoi Semula.

Accompanied by veteran Yusof Jalil on the guitar, Jaafar will croon Asli favourites such as Bunga Tanjung Kembang Tak Jadi, Bintang Terang Bulan Mengambang and Pasir Roboh at functions.

For his age, Jaafar is always trim and dapper, and is a stickler for punctuality.

He exercises by walking a distance of two kilometres daily, weather

permitting and also potters about in his garden.

As an accomplished "tukang karang" Jaafar has not enjoyed much monetary or material rewards.

For all these years, he has only a few awards, certificates and citations to show for his talent which has given so much pleasure to so many.

However, he remains undaunted and is prepared to help out students interested in perpetuating the art form of Boria.

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