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Mahsuri homecoming

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THE pretty 15-year-old, so photographed in so short a time, looked pale and drawn by the time she reached the Radio Tiga Langkawi studio on her last night on the island.

Wan Aishah, the seventh-generation descendant of Mahsuri, had returned to her famed ancestor's home and the island and its people could not get enough of her.

There were hands to be shaken at every corner, stops to be made for flashing cameras and endless questions from the curious.

People seemed as fascinated with the young girl as with the legend that ties her to the island.

The tragic tale of beautiful Mahsuri, unjustly accused of adultery and sentenced to die, has leapt out of textbooks, and become almost tangible with Wan Aishah's presence here last week.

The curse, believed to have brought destruction and doom to the island and was to last for seven generations, lifted only after the birth of Wan Aishah.

As the legend goes, Mahsuri was the object of envy of the village headman's wife Wan Mahora. She accused Mahsuri of adultery with a handsome minstrel visiting the island while Mahsuri's husband, Wan Darus, was away.

Another version comes from Wan Aishah's home, Phuket. Here it is said that Mahsuri rejected the advances of Wan Darus' brother who tried to seduce her while her husband was away.

Irate at having his advances turned down by Mahsuri, the brother-in-law wrote to Wan Darus, accusing Mahsuri of adultery.

Wan Darus, who was away trading in Namnoi at the Ligor-Senggora border, was so angered that he ordered his wife be put to death.

The local chieftain, Datuk Pekerma Jaya, immediately ordered that the death sentence be carried out.

According to most versions of this legend, white blood spouted from Mahsuri's body when stabbed with her own keris, signifying her innocence.

She was said to have uttered a curse in her dying moments, saying that Langkawi would not prosper for seven generations.

After her death, Mahsuri's husband and son moved to Phuket.

According to Ramlee Mohamed Shariff, a member of the Kedah branch of the Malaysian Historical Society who researched the subject extensively for his degree in History, there are at least 14 versions of this story.

He said most of the versions were handed down orally and had many differences between them.

Which of the 14 versions, if any, is to be believed?

This seemed a key question among some Langkawi folk during Wan Aishah's four days in the country.

Brought here on a trip organised by the Utusan Group in conjunction with the Langkawi Development Authority's 10th anniversary, Wan Aishah received a rousing welcome at the airport complete with kompong and bunga manggar.

She was accompanied by her father Wan Nawawi, mother Sumaini Yayee, grandfather Wan Hashim, younger brother Muhamad Yihan and several other family members.

Despite the overwhelming response Wan Aishah and her family received in Langkawi, there were also sceptics. Many of these called up during the phone-in session with Radio Tiga Langkawi and asked how anyone really knew Wan Aishah was a descendant of Mahsuri.

While research and studies, including the ones carried out by the Kedah Historical Society and the Kedah Museum were cited as proof of thorough work having been done to ascertain Wan Aishah's lineage, a curious incident convinced some doubters of her link to Mahsuri.

On her second day in Langkawi, Wan Aishah and her family members gathered to witness a play based on the legend which was staged at the Langkawi International Book Village in Lubuk Semilang.

It had been raining all morning but the skies cleared shortly before the play. However, when the character playing Mahsuri was stabbed, Wan Aishah began to cry and moments later, when the curse was said aloud, a sudden burst of rain and the clap of thunder jarred the crowd.

Whether a coincidence or not, it earned a respectful silence from the 400-strong crowd who had gathered for a glimpse of Wan Aishah.

While Wan Aishah said she was aware of the legend, she did wonder what the fuss was all about.

"My grandfather told me many times about Mahsuri and Langkawi but I am very surprised by the response I have received here," she said.

Up till last week she was Sirintra Yayee, an average school-going Thai girl who received no extra attention or special treatment back home in Kampung Kemala, Phuket.

However, this young girl, suddenly thrust into the limelight in a country she does not call home, among strangers speaking languages she cannot understand, says she has enjoyed the experience.

"I don't mind the attention but there are times... well, when I feel tak selesa or tired," she said, speaking with the help of an interpreter.

Her schedule in Langkawi was a gruelling one. She arrived to a Press conference on the evening of May 30 and this was followed by a dinner.

The next day began early with her attending a function titled "A Day With Mahsuri's Descendants" at the Langkawi International Book Village Amphitheatre in Lubuk Semilang where the earlier mentioned play was performed.

The hundreds gathered there, many of whom were students, gave her presents and took photographs, some standing less than a metre away and snapping as many photos as they could before she was whisked away to the next destination.

At Mahsuri's grave, the same thing happened, as tourists and locals rushed to take photographs and shake her hand.

Many came up to speak to her in Bahasa Malaysia and found themselves going away bewildered when she looked blankly and replied in Thai instead.

One old man caught behind a long line of curious onlookers even ran after the entourage, stopped them and asked to see Wan Aishah's face.

In the afternoon, she had lunch at Kampung Tok Senik and this was followed by a re-staging of the play witnessed earlier in the morning at the Laman Padi complex - minus the mysterious climatic changes this time.

Here she was met by Culture, Arts and Tourism Minister Datuk Abdul Kadir Sheikh Fadzir who invited Wan Aishah and her family to make Langkawi their home.

Without prompting or hesitation, her reply was: "I was born in Phuket and this is my home so I naturally have ties to Thailand. But give me some time to finish my education in Thailand and some time to think about the move."

This was quite an about-turn from earlier statements where Wan Aishah said she would like to live and study here.

Several members of the Press who had been following her throughout her stay remarked that she may have changed her favourable view of Langkawi after having been on her feet all day, exhaustion showing on her face and disturbed by the constant attention.

Later, Wan Aishah, dressed in traditional Malay garb and a veil, attended the 9pm launch of the Fiesta Langkawi where she was introduced to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

After this, she was believed to have gone for a photo session until the wee hours of the morning.

Early on her third day in Langkawi, she had to catch a 7.30am ferry to the mainland for an audience with the Sultan of Kedah, luncheon at the Kedah Cafe and return to Langkawi for the Radio Tiga interview.

She arrived a little late, unsmiling and refusing food. It was obvious that Wan Aishah had had enough.

Resting for about 10 minutes, she launched into a one-hour interview, answering at least 30 phone calls from listeners in the State, many speaking to her in her native Thai.

But living up to the picture painted of her - quiet, shy and sweet - she listened patiently and answered politely, showing a maturity far beyond her years.

When asked what her usual day was like, this Form Four student said apart from schooling, she helped her family sell newspapers. She also liked to watch television in her spare time.

This was far removed from her life during the three-day whirlwind trip to Malaysia. This time she was on television most of the time.

Wan Aishah also said she liked school, enjoyed mathematics and missed her friends.

"The first thing I will do when I get home to Phuket is to look for my friends and tell them about my experiences here," she said.

Asked what she would tell her friends upon her return, Wan Aishah said she would tell them all she had seen, done, and how nice the people in Langkawi had been.

She returned home to Phuket on June 2 with her family in tow. Now we wait to see if the family will accept the generous offer made to them and whether they will make the trip back to the island which their ancestors left under tragic circumstances.

Asked if all she has been through had changed her life, she replied, after a long thoughtful pause, that it had.

"I feel like I am someone special now ... I feel people respect me and I feel a connection with the island," she said.

She left the studio with the same sweet smile that captivated so many for those four memorable days.

Waiving goodbye, she was then bundled into a waiting car, police escort and all, to attend yet another public engagement, more hands to shake and photos to take.

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