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New start for old bazaar

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THERE are exciting developments in store for Pekan Rabu, which began as a collection of stalls along Tanjung Chali in Alor Star in the 1930s and became a bustling bazaar that no visitor to the town will miss.

This is where everyone's favourite songkok-maker and dodol-seller can be found, but more importantly, it is the place where many a Bumiputera trader had their first taste of business.

According to Azmi Shahab, who chairs the Koperasi Pekan Rabu Berhad, it has been proposed that Pekan Rabu be turned into a cultural centre of sorts, with every State invited to put on cultural performances and exhibit or sell their traditional wares here.

The proposal will involve turning Jalan Tunku Ibrahim, along which Pekan Rabu lies, into a one-way street.

It will be paved and a special stop will be built alongside Pekan Rabu for tour buses.

The co-operative has also proposed that a stage be constructed on Sungai Raja, which flows on one side of Pekan Rabu, for the cultural performances and exhibitions. It can also be used for lelong sessions.

There are also plans to take over an adjacent building to cater to a growing demand for shoplots from Bumiputera traders.

In addition, the co-operative is looking to build a trade centre nearby to house its offices and hold exhibitions.

Also, a covered and paved walkway will be created between Pekan Rabu and the adjacent building. It will be called "Che Det Walk" in honour of the bazaar's best-known trader, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

"It may not sound like much but it's a new start for Pekan Rabu. We want to modernise it," says Azmi.

And it will be a big change for Pekan Rabu, which had a facelift in 1996.

Pekan Rabu began as a pekan nat, the Thai word nat meaning appointment, in this case indicating an appointment made between buyers and sellers to meet and conduct business on a particular day.

Records in the State Public Library show that it was established as a market especially for Malay petty traders by the then Agriculture Department head, Tunku Yaakob Sultan Abdul Hamid Halim Shah.

Open only on Wednesdays, it was located along Tanjung Chali in Alor Star and allowed traders to bring their goods from the outskirts of town to the market via the river.

Around 1932, the traders in Pekan Rabu were asked to move out of the area to make way for the new Customs office.

The traders were not happy about the move as they would no longer be able to transport their goods by boat.

However, they were placated when Tunku Yaakob found a new place for them - its present location - in Jalan Tunku Ibrahim in the centre of town.

Old photographs show this relocated Pekan Rabu to be a three-storey, brick-floored and attap-roofed building.

In 1942, the shops began opening for business daily rather than solely on Wednesdays. The co-operative that handled the administration and maintenance of Pekan Rabu was also set up in that year.

In 1976, work on a new building began and in 1978, the construction of the four blocks of three-storey buildings was completed.

While the look of Pekan Rabu has changed immensely over the years,

businesses here remain very much a family affair, with a trade or a shop handed down from one generation to the next.

Fadzil Ismail, 61, who runs a jewellery store, first came to work in Pekan Rabu in 1953.

"I started working in Pekan Rabu as a tukang for Haji Shamsudin whose family still runs a jewellery store downstairs.

"In those days, getting even a single order a day was difficult," he says.

Today, he has a thriving business on the top floor of Pekan Rabu's main building. His two sons work with him, one learning the craft of jewellery-making while the other handles the day-to-day running of the shop.

Some shops have even become institutions, like Mak Chah's tiny corner shop, filled with shiny tubs of dodol and piled high with cookie containers.

According to Azmi, Mak Chah (or Aishah Ismail), is over 80 years old and is probably the oldest tenant in Pekan Rabu.

Her face has graced the pages of local newspapers, especially when Dr Mahathir drops by to collect his supply of goodies every Hari Raya.

She is tiny, bent over and rather serious in her demeanour but she attends to a steady stream of customers.

While the old shops give Pekan Rabu its quaint appeal, some feel that there are too many selling the same items.

Azmi said the co-operative always encouraged its members to try something new.

"We (Pekan Rabu traders) are not trying to compete with expensive, high-end stores. We sell daily necessities and other items not found elsewhere at very affordable prices," he adds.

Many of the traders are also specialists in their fields.

"The traders here do not only sell the songkok, they also make them. The same goes for the jewellers.

"There is no place like Pekan Rabu for those wanting to prepare for the Haj. Everything they need is available here," Azmi says.

There are also surprises for shoppers - if they look closely.

For instance, if one manages not to get distracted by the colourful scarves that overwhelm a store front, one might just notice that underneath the large letters announcing the store's name is a smaller sign which reads "Agensi Pencari Jodoh".

It may seem strange that Pekan Rabu, better known for its retail business, has such additional services!

This matchmaking agency belongs to 45-year-old Hussain Saad, who prefers to be known as Along.

He claims his clientele is 90 per cent female.

Pekan Rabu will always hold promise for small-scale Malay traders, and an opportunity to learn and grow.

With its low rental rates, special business courses and strategic location, it has given hundreds of Malay traders the opportunity to learn the ropes at their own pace and gain the confidence they need to move on to bigger things.

As exciting as the proposed changes may be, traders want to keep the old feel of things at Pekan Rabu, including its name.

A recent suggestion to have Pekan Rabu renamed "Che Det Mall" have been set aside as traders feared a name change would also cause a change of identity.

"Traders here feel that much of Pekan Rabu's history is tied to its name.

It is comforting to know that in choosing to modernise, the Pekan Rabu folk appreciate their history and know well that this is what makes the

place so special.

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