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Whatever it is, let it still be Pekan Rabu

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PEKAN Rabu is a household word in Alor Star and I can quite understand how Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad must have felt when he expressed that he was "less than thrilled at the prospect of Pekan Rabu being renamed Che Det Mall in his honour", (NST, July 27).

Using the word "mall" for Pekan Rabu may make it lose its "Malayness" and origin of development as the place was built for petty Malay traders.

The place first started as a Wednesday-only pasar tani or telad nat wan phud to the Thai-speaking Malays from the rural areas of Pokok Sena, Gajah Mati, Bukit Lada, Kubur Panjang and Jitra, who formed the majority of the traders there during the pre-War days.

The concept of a mall originated in the United States and is associated with a huge shopping complex with restaurants and entertainment centres with ample parking areas and excellent transportation service. With that picture in mind, Pekan Rabu is nowhere near a mall in characteristics.

My earliest recollection of Pekan Rabu goes back to as far back as 1940 when I used to accompany my mother there in a rickshaw whenever she needed her supply of ikan pekasam, jeruk keman, ikan sepat kering, emping and the mouth-watering tapai.

I looked forward to going there each time as I would be given free boiled peanuts and buah keriang when in season by some of the female hawkers when they learned that I was the nephew of Tunku Kalsom (Tunku Chom), Tunku Abdul Rahman's eldest sister.

Tunku Chom was acknowledged as the matriach of the Thai-speaking Malays in Pekan Rabu when my grandmother Che Menjalara became too ill to attend to their affairs. The late Tunku Chom was fluent in Thai language and she was accepted as a Thai rather than a Malay by the Thai community in Kedah.

The old Pekan Rabu as far as I can recall consisted of a single dark grey structure with a roof but without walls. The vendors would display and sell their farm produce in rows on the floor.

They would use the kepoi and cupak as measures and in the case of fruit and vegetables it would be sold according to each lungguk or ikat. At that time banana leaves were used as wrappers by the vendors.

The modernisation of Pekan Rabu in Alor Star started in 1943 during the Japanese military administration which was headed by Major General Sukegawa.

My uncle, Tunku Yaacob was then the head of Nomu-ka or Agriculture Department and his responsibilities included co-operative societies, veterinary weekly fairs, drainage and irrigation.

It was due to Tunku Yaacob's efforts that another complex for Malay traders was built on the opposite side of Pekan Rabu along Jalan Regent, now known as Jalan Tunku Ibrahim.

The complex was called Pasar Yaacob and consisted of small shop lots where the Malays could sell songkok, books, traditional medicine, sandals and clothing instead of just agricultural products in the old building.

However, in the early 1950s Pasar Yaacob was demolished and relocated to the same area as Pekan Rabu opposite the old Empire Theatre.

Thus, Pekan Rabu from the 1950s became a Malay bazaar providing opportunities for the Malays in Kedah to do business there.

No doubt it will go down in history that Pekan Rabu has produced the most distinguished and famous vendor in Malaysia, Dr Mahathir or Che Det.

With his interest, support and sentimental attachment to the place, it

will continue to thrive as a centre for the average hardworking Malay to venture into business.

Pekan Rabu, therefore should remain as Pekan Rabu even though it has metamorphosed into a modern shopping complex.