

11/12/2002

Is this the final chapter?

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IN the tranquil sanctuary of the rainforest reserve in Lubok Semilang, Langkawi, there are probably more "gatecrashing" visitors seeking succour from the abundant fruits and lush tropical vegetation than the humankind in thirst of knowledge.

Built on the twin premises of Nature and Knowledge, Kampung Buku, nestled on the foothills of Gunung Raya, the island's highest peak, suffers from a dereliction of purpose through an unhappy chain of circumstances.

It is touted as the first, and so far only, book village in Southeast Asia, but is fighting a rearguard action against becoming a footnote in history.

Of the 10 pondok repositories of books on a modest 1.4-hectare site used so far out of a vast allocation, only three of the pondoks with quaint Malay architecture remain.

"Our people don't read much, which is a pity for the book-sellers," lamented the manager, Hashim Ismail, a 61-year-old former education officer-cum-teacher who now operates on a "skeletal" staff of one-plus-one - he and his clerk.

His assistant had just recently resigned.

Although the literacy rate among Malaysians aged 10 to 64 years has increased from 88.6 per cent in 1991 to 93.5 per cent in 2000 (Population and Housing Census), the reading habit is woefully rare, what with modern high-tech distractions such as satellite TV, CD-ROMs, DVDs/VCDs, audio-books, the Internet, PDAs and other mobile telecommunication tools.

Of the pioneer tenants at Kampung Buku, the first to call it quits was Popular Book Company, housed in Rumah Huenk Ruessink, named after the founder of the Bredevoort Boekenstad in Holland.

Its marketing accent on East Asian books did not look a lucrative gambit.

"Popular had books in Chinese and other East Asian languages like Thai, Vietnamese and Tagalog, but it had to close down when it could not pay for even basic needs," said Hashim.

But the wedge that split the heart of the newly-fabled Bookland was when local stalwart Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka also caved in and packed up.

Left to put up a ghostly semblance of the book village's identity are Darulfikir, Pustaka Union, and Hizbi and Pustaka al-Has, sharing space at Rumah Noel Anselot, named after the founder of the Redu Village du Livre in Belgium.

Darulfikir, which according to Hashim is the "only profitable venture (there)," specialises in second-hand and antiquarian books in Arabic, English and Bahasa Melayu, and on Arabic literature, Islam and the Quran.

"It's the trend nowadays for people to read religious books and hence, Darulfikir's greater popularity," he said.

But its collection of books, especially on Islamic thoughts and issues in English, pales in comparison to those available, say, at the Islamic Arts Museum in Kuala Lumpur.

So would one go to Darulfikir if one is expecting a comprehensive source of Islamic-related publications?

Pustaka Union, housed in Rumah Richard Booth, named after the founder of the first and most successful book village at Hay-on-Wye in Britain, sells old and antiquarian books in English. There are the odd surprises to be

had, at only RM3 a title, but these can be counted on one hand.

Hizbi sells children's and religious books, while Pustaka al-Has caters to children. But then the display lacks the creativity to attract younger readers, much less absorb them in the activities between the pages.

At Rumah Pok Rafeah, the secretariat named after the mother of former Economic Adviser Tun Daim Zainuddin, there are also books for sale. It has books written by Malaysian leaders, including Tan Sri Sanusi Junid, the former Kedah Menteri Besar whose brainchild it was to set up the book village, and a modicum of books which are out-of-print school texts and fiction in English.

Hashim said that some of the English books are sourced from another book village, but this is probably the only primitive networking forged.

The secretariat also acts as an information centre, with pamphlets on other tourist attractions in the fabled island of Mahsuri.

Recently, it allocated a corner to the International Islamic University to highlight books written by its staff and act as an information centre.

"We plan to allocate such spaces to other interested universities," said Hashim.

The saving grace is probably its collection of some 700 old and rare books with titles that include A Malay-English Dictionary (romanised) by R.J. Wilkinson (Kelly & Walsh Ltd, 1901, with Jawi notations and bought from a Sotheby's London auction for STG3,000); A Dictionary of Malayan Medicine by John D. Gimlette; Six Years In The Malayan Jungle by Carveth Wells (Garden City, New York); The Further Side of Silence by Sir Hugh Clifford (Doubleday, 1927); A Garden Book of Malaya by Kathleen Gough (H.F. & G. Witherby, London); The East India Company: A History by Brian Gardner (McCall New York, 1833).

There is also a book titled Report on the Federated Malay States; Pahang by Willard Bush (Macmillan, 1938); a 1823 publication titled Travels in South-east Asia by an anonymous writer, and a slew of old Islamic manuscripts.

But most visit the place for its phenomenal natural beauty, a rambling tropical jungle paradise with the clear sparkling waters of the meandering Sungai Korok offering a welcome respite, for picnics and camping. One can trek through the jungle under the lush canopy of Karas trees up to the peak or take the 4,287 built steps.

"The landscaping and general maintenance of the place have been privatised. We don't charge for camping but we are facing perennial problems of littering, even to the extent of disposable diapers in the rivers," said Hashim.

He said the Pokok Nangka Pipit attracts wild monkeys and their black macaque cousins, and hornbills, while the butterfly season in April has Japanese enthusiasts flocking there.

But is that what the book village has amounted to, a botanical delight with all the trees like the Pokok Ara duly identified?

To be sure, when Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad unveiled the commemorative monument on Dec 3, 1997, it was at the onset of the East Asian economic contagion which had scotched many a best-laid plan.

The book village had teetered and stumbled since then, through a throttling of funds for activities, while the onrush of digitalised information up-ends its relevance.

As it wobbles to its fifth anniversary, the book village needs a relook at its direction and even purpose.

One of the most puzzling questions is that with Langkawi having been a duty-free paradise since 1985, why can't new books be sold at attractive prices to lure the true bibliophile as well as the casual and occasional reader?

With the present prohibitive prices of books,- even paperbacks- we will soon have a generation of illiterates, through a lack of means rather than desire.

The rash of activities in the earlier years such as poetry reading, debating sessions and acted-out sketches at its amphitheatre has also fizzled out.

Even the annual International Book Festival, a prestigious honour for any book village, chooses the Putra World Trade Centre in Kuala Lumpur as its venue instead.

And what about a famous writer-in-residence?

While Kampung Buku was the 18th of the International Book Villages and Book Towns Movement to be set up, the level of networking and feedback with fellow villages crucial to its survival needs to be upgraded.

It also lacks a support system of downstream activities such as paper production, calligraphy, printing, book design and illustration, traditional bookbinding, apart from just the sale and collection of books.

There is also the need to look into merchandising, and a cafeteria with Internet and multimedia facilities.

But most of all, there must be a practical transport system at regular intervals to take both locals and foreigners there and back.

Unless the book village goes back to the drawing board, it will remain an excellent recreational area in an authentic kampung setting- for chasing butterflies.

The book village is open seven days a week, from 9am to 6pm. For details, call 04-9555568; or fax: 04-9555562, or visit the website at <http://www.lovemalaysia.com/langkawi/places.htm>

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